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Captain's Log

This issue is something I've been working on for years. Not because it's been a drawn-out process (although it has, but that's par for the course) but because the plans for it started back in July 2022.

As time's gone on our *Stranger Things* issues have become more and more popular (yes, we've been doing *Stranger Things* covers since the start, unlike some whippersnappers), so it made sense that we should go out with a bang for the fifth and final chapter. But life got in the way and here we are over three years later!

Stranger Things is a rare occurrence – something that really hit the zeitgeist, crossing over in ways people could never foresee. So I'm sad to see it go – in this form, at least, as the wider "Universe" will continue, but this One Last Adventure promises to be the biggest yet. That's why our covers *this* issue go full circle, back to the OG four – with a promise of even yet more to come from different faces... (see page 113) Like the episodes themselves, our content just gets bigger and bigger!

In fact, there's been so much going on that we're *slightly* catching up on ourselves from last month and moving things that were intended for this issue into the next. But that's a good problem to have, right? Nothing's going to waste, all that goodness is coming direct to your eyeballs! See you in the Upside Down...

Darren X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Absolutely loving *It: Welcome To Derry*, it's gorgeous, epic and terrifying.

→ Great news about Film Is Fabulous getting charitable status – look them up and support their work in preserving film collections!

RANTS

→ Obviously I'm *gutted* that spooky season is over for another year, but the countdown resets...

→ Times are tougher still for magazines – consider a subscription as a Christmas gift if you could.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ I love *Doctor Who*, and I love David Pelham's book cover art for '70s Penguins. So naturally I'm loving how Sean Coleman mashes the two together in his latest postcard pack of imagined covers for novelisations. Check out etsy.com/uk/shop/ColemanDesignUK.

→ Speaking of Penguin, I'll be picking up some of their latest batch of literary horror reprints, which includes the likes of Rosalind Ashe's 1976 novel *Moths* and the Edith Wharton collection *Pomegranate Seed And Other Ghostly Tales*.

RANTS

→ To be honest, I got exhausted of reading about missing episodes of *Doctor Who* years ago. I'll get excited at the point where the title sequence of one is actually playing on my TV set.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ The ever wonderful *Hellebore* magazine has put together *Tales Of Occult Britain*, its first anthology of spine-tingling short stories. Check it out at helleborezine.com/products/tales.

→ I've lost myself in the UK Cinema Retro Trailer Reels channel on YouTube: a treasurehouse of old movie trailers, adverts and assorted nostalgic triggers.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Bugonia* is a smart, ruthless satire about humanity, tied up with an unexpected genre ribbon. You'll be thinking about it long afterwards.

RANTS

→ Hilarious to discover in 2025 that *Star Wars: The Rise Of Skywalker* cost $593.7 million, basically killing their film slate up to 2026. Never make a trilogy without planning and finished scripts, kids!

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

DECEMBER 2025

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HOLY SERIES ORDER!

Festive movie *Merry Little Batman* is reborn as *Bat-Fam*

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→ Get ready for the internet to say highly inappropriate things about humanoid animals again...

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Goofy Gotham

Bat-Fam director Mike Roth on how *Merry Little Batman* became a series WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

IN LATE 2023, DC AND WARNER Bros Animation introduced the world to Damian Wayne (aka Little Batman) in the Prime Video holiday movie *Merry Little Batman*. A family centric take on the Dark Knight lore, it revealed the dad-first side of Bruce Wayne/Batman (Luke Wilson) as he tries to parent his very excitable son, Damian (Yonas Kibreab).

The success of the film allowed director Mike Roth to roll right into developing the world and characters into a series, *Bat-Fam*. Retaining the same voice actors and vibe, the series expands the Wayne household to include ghosts, age-reversed former villains and even a crazy uncle, Man-Bat (Bobby Moynihan).

"We pick up right where the movie leaves off, and we introduce a bunch of new characters to the cast," Roth tells Red Alert about how the two projects snap together.

"We're hoping to keep that enthusiasm from the movie to the series, so it's a little bit of everything in there for everybody. We definitely wanted some space for that zaniness and to push expressions, while the main thrust of it is a grounded family sitcom with relatable moments.

> **"It's important to know what Batman's perspective is"**

"Every story starts very small, and then the throughline is what the character is dealing with emotionally that makes them make a *bad* decision that drives them into the chaos and opens the door for villains and for Batman."

Supporting Bruce and Damian day-to-day is their centenarian version of Alfred (James Cromwell); Damien's trickster Pap-Pap, the ghostly version of Ra's al Ghul (Michael Benyaer); Claire (Haley Tju), the former Volcana, who is now a 12-year-old ward, and Bruce's childhood friend/Alfred's grandniece, Alicia Pennyworth (London Hughes).

"Alicia is a really exciting character," Roth says of their original character, a social worker rehabilitating former supervillains. "Bruce is very pragmatic, he's very methodical, he's very prudent. He's a little bit of a control nut. We call him a bat-copter dad. There was a desire to have a counterpart to that, and that's where Alicia steps in. She's free-spirited. She's travelled the whole world, and she's immersed herself in all the cultures of the world, and that gives her a very unique perspective."

Bruce is going to need it, because would any version of the lore truly be Batman without some angst? In this case, Bruce is wrestling with his son knowing his superhero secret and taking him out into the field.

"It is Batman at the end of the day, so it's important to know what Batman's perspective of it is, and how is he processing all this and accepting all these new things? You're talking about a guy who spent his whole life running around the dark by himself," Roth points out. "His parents were killed, and it seems like this is the type of person that would have some trust issues. What does that look like in terms of introducing them into the more dangerous sides of his life? He loves them so much he doesn't want them to be hurt."

That gets addressed often when it comes to the both familiar and original villains who will cross paths with Damian, his dad and their family, as Gotham gets some troublesome visitors on the regular.

"Of course, we want those 'Big Bads' in there," Roth teases about what adversaries will appear in *Bat-Fam*. "But what's so great about the series is that because it's not just one huge story and it's all these smaller stories, it gives us a lane to bring in some of the lesser villains who are interesting. Like the Mad Hatter, who's not necessarily the biggest bad, but he's up there and he's fun to see. Or Solomon Grundy and Livewire."

Fans of the *Batman* world get to see these characters brought to life in a Ronald Searle-inspired illustrative art style, as interpreted by production designer Guillaume Fesquet.

"A lot of animated designs are designed for animation, but we worked in reverse," Roth says of this world's Emmy Award-winning look. "We found what we liked and then we had to do our own pseudo-science to figure out how to give it the production value that it needs so that it can move and animate and work within the constraints of animation. It's just so fun to see all these villains put through that design filter. It was really exciting for us to ask, 'What does Ra's al Ghul look like with this style?' Or 'What does Grundy look like, or Clayface?' Of course, we look to the original series for clues, but it's fun to push it to get this different look that we have."

Bat-Fam is on Prime Video from 10 November.

Looks like Damian might have eaten a vindaloo.

The Caped Crusader is voiced here by Luke Wilson.

Man-Bat resides up in the belfry of Wayne Manor.

Bruce, Alicia Pennyworth, and her uncle Alfred.

SCI-FACT! **Actor Diedrich Bader will voice a character in *Bat-Fam* – but not Bruce Wayne/Batman, who he has voiced on multiple occasions.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Needle And Dead

Julia Ducournau's **Alpha** is a shiver-inducing AIDS-adjacent drama

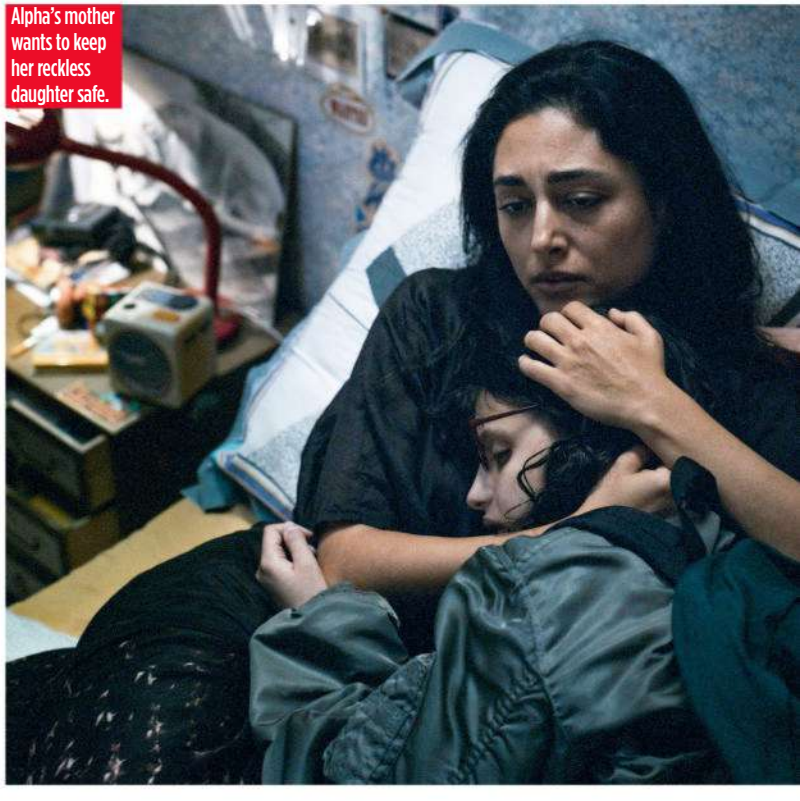
WORDS: **JAMES MOTTRAM**

JULIA DUCOURNAU knows what it means to make polarising films. Her 2016 debut *Raw* was a squeamish, skin-ripping cannibalism yarn. She followed it with the Palme d'Or-winning *Titane*, a twisted psychological tale that took auto-eroticism to extremes. Now comes her latest, *Alpha*, a film that was equally divisive when it premiered in Cannes earlier this year. "What can I tell you? It feels like history repeating," she shrugs. "To me, *Alpha* is incredibly different from *Titane*, and I do not convey the same kind of emotions in it, and I didn't put the same part of me in it. But, hey, what can I do?"

Whatever side you land on, *Alpha* is another stark and startling vision from the French filmmaker. Set in an alternate '90s Paris, it begins when 13-year-old girl Alpha (Mélissa Boros) comes home from a party with a crude "A" tattoo carved into her arm. Her medic mother (Golshifteh Farahani) fears her daughter may have contracted an increasingly widespread virus from a dirty needle – a virus that turns those that contract it into marble-like cadavers. As Ducournau explains, it was her unique way of exploring the AIDS epidemic that swept communities in the '80s and '90s.

"During the peak of the pandemic of AIDS, the unsaid was everywhere," she says. "It was named by the '90s. But no one would talk about it. It was not only about protecting the children – a good intention – but also created a lot of fear in my generation, because that's when you feel the adults are lying to you. You think that the danger is imminent. That they [AIDS patients] were shunned out of society and shamed for it... is something that we have never really talked about. I think it's not a good mirror for humanity."

No doubt, the film will also bring back reminders for many of the spread of Covid-19, although Ducournau is quick to point out



Alpha's mother wants to keep her reckless daughter safe.

Other pupils flee when Alpha bleeds in a school pool.

The disease causes victims to slowly turn to marble.

Tahar Rahim (left) is Amin, Alpha's drug addict uncle.

Director Julia Ducournau (centre) on the set.

the differences. "No one has been shunned or pointed at or shamed or guilt-tripped for decades because of the [Covid] disease. But it's true that there were cases... I have a friend who had it very seriously and was in the hospital, and he told me, 'There were only people in hazmat suits, and I couldn't see my parents. My parents couldn't see me and I thought I was going to die', which is utterly terrifying. So this was an absolutely extreme moment."

Ducournau, whose own parents worked in the medical profession, channels her themes through the portrait of Alpha's uncle (*A Prophet* star Tahar Rahim), a rake-thin junkie who may or may not have this flesh-ravaging virus. The result is another unique slice of body horror from Ducournau, aided by some brilliant work from make-up artist Olivier Afonso and her regular DoP, Belgian-born Ruben Impens, who crafts a hallucinogenic feel to the visuals, including a stunning CG-heavy, orange-tinged dust storm.

What's even more remarkable is quite how fast the project came together. Ducournau wrote the script in 18 months – half the time it took her to pen her earlier movies – and then told her producer in the summer of 2024 that she wanted it out in the world by the following year. "That's really a very short amount of time to find funding and also to build the entire film," she says. "But I wanted to shoot it fast. It's like I wanted it out of me, you know? I needed to express that. I think I needed to scream that in a way."

While *Alpha* wasn't the only film in Cannes this year to tackle transmittable diseases – school-set coming-of-ager *The Plague* also touched on the subject – it shows that Ducournau is a director unwilling to compromise her vision. "I don't have a choice, really," she says. "If you see me from the outside, I am very straightforward and steadfast. I'm quick to make choices. But any director is going to do that, of course. I think it's just that if I don't express myself fully, I wouldn't be doing this. I'd probably be something else. I would choke!"

Given the horrors she shows on screen, it begs the question whether Ducournau ever gets nightmares. "Nightmares are supposed to clean your mind," she says. "It's very, very healthy to have nightmares. It's the way your mind purges things. The fantasy there is around nightmares or the uncanny... these are actually a very healthy way to deal with our darkest parts. And we all have very dark parts that we need to hurt in order to be a functional human being who's going to be good to others. So I would say that I'm a decent human being with a decent amount of nightmares."

> **"To me, Alpha is incredibly different from Titane"**

Alpha is in cinemas from 14 November.

SCI-FACT! **Tahar Rahim spent three and a half months shedding around 20 kilograms of weight to play the role of Amin.**

SCI-FACT! **The first Jekyll and Hyde comic is believed to be 1943's *Classic Comics* issue 13, an adaptation of Stevenson's story.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

The Immoral Hulk

Hyde leaves Jekyll behind in a new graphic novel series featuring collaboration from Johnny Depp

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Johnny Depp allowed them to use his likeness for Hyde.

THE FORERUNNER TO the Hulk, Robert Louis Stevenson's original inner monster leaves his other half behind in *Hyde* – a new two-volume graphic novel series from production company Mechanical Cake's comics division, published in partnership with Ridley Scott's Scott Free.

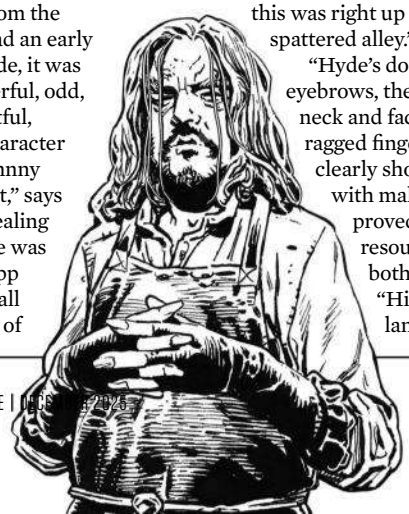
"Hyde begins right where *Strange Case Of Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde* ends," says Jesse Negron, who co-writes with Joe Matsumoto. "We have a line, 'In what implausible world would Jekyll defeat Hyde?' When I look around the world, the Hydes virtually always win. Our Hyde creates a concoction, fakes his own death and kills off Jekyll. He wakes up and crawls out of the London morgue and goes to live in the sewer, where he conducts experiments on other Londoners without Jekyll holding him back."

Creating an army of Hydes, he then sets his nefarious plan in motion. "Hyde has deep thoughts about human nature and the plight of London," continues Negron. "But everything gets turned on its head and the other Hydes become relevant. There's a journey to other continents and then a final showdown."

Johnny Depp has officially allowed his likeness to be used for the character, posing in costume for artists Chris Weston and Gary Erskine. "From the moment I had an early vision of Hyde, it was some wonderful, odd, twisted, wistful, terrifying character that only Johnny could inhabit," says Negron, revealing that when he was younger, Depp carried a small leather copy of *Jekyll And Hyde* in his back pocket. "So he was connected to Hyde in a foundational way I could never have predicted."

"Johnny threw himself into the role wholeheartedly, even going to the lengths of wearing some cool prosthetic appliances to change his appearance," continues Weston. "Despite being a handsome fellow in real life, he seems to revel in ugly and demented characters, so this was right up his blood-spattered alley."

"Hyde's double iris, bushy eyebrows, the veins on his neck and face and long ragged fingernails were clearly shown on Depp with make-up and proved a valuable resource for us both," adds Erskine. "His body language was also helpful, as we could see how Hyde would move around the room, and Hyde's vocal mannerisms reminded me a bit of Jack Sparrow, but with more menace and madness."



> **When I look around the world, the Hydes always win**

Hyde owes much to Negron's childhood love of the '70s TV show *The Incredible Hulk*; the writer says he has "the sad piano, 'Lonely Man' theme tune from the end of every episode and the image of David Banner walking off to hitchhike to his next destination seared in my memory".

"For me, the Hulk has always been about how sad and horrifying it is to have a dark, shameful thing living inside you," he says. "That's the human condition, and I've never seen or read another Hulk story that captured the emotion of that show. Jekyll and Hyde have to somehow accept the existence of each other otherwise they're short-circuiting what it is to be human, and that idea is fundamental to Hyde."

Hyde: The Graphic Novel is available to pre-order now.

Meet the residents of Panoptopolis. Nice bunch...

PANOPTOPOLIS
IT IS RESERVED FOR THE VERY WORST OF THE MOST DANGEROUS TRANSGRESSORS IN THE UNIVERSE.
IT IS LOCKED IN ORBIT ON THE EDGE OF THE EVENT HORIZON OF A BLACK HOLE.
WHERE NOTHING CAN ESCAPE NOT EVEN LIGHT.
ALL THE POOR SOULS ABOARD THIS TRANSPORT KNOW THEIR FATE IS SEALED AS SOON AS IT DOCKS.
THIS IS WHERE THEY WILL SERVE OUT THEIR DAYS. THEY ARE DESIGNED TO FAIL.

The Doctor and Belinda, in trouble. As usual.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Doing Time

The Doctor goes behind bars in Titan Comics' new series

The Prison Paradox WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

NCUTI GATWA'S TIME IN THE TARDIS has come to an end on the small screen, but the Fifteenth Doctor's adventures are continuing at Titan Comics in new four-parter *The Prison Paradox*. After teaming up with Ruby in 2023 miniseries *Everything Must Go*, this time he's joined by Varada Sethu's Belinda Chandra, who provides a very different dynamic.

"Belinda's a bit more of a prickly character than Ruby," says writer Dan Watters. "Quite often pricklier than this incarnation of the Doctor himself. Usually, it's the other way around with the Doctor and their companion, so it's an interesting way to switch it up."

With Watters praising artist Sami Kivelä for "giving it a scale that surpassed my hopes," *The Prison Paradox* takes place in the apparently inescapable Panoptopolis prison, which is located in a forgotten part of the universe. "This story was originally conceived as a casino heist, but I thought heisting a prison could be more interesting," reveals Watters. "*Doctor Who* has told every story under the sun already – it's the nature of the beast – but I feel like we haven't seen this one too much.

"Trust the Doctor to be the one breaking into rather than out of a prison. As for how the Doctor and Belinda end up in a Shadow Proclamation prison, that's definitely a mystery that we'll unspool throughout the story."

The various alien species incarcerated in the Panoptopolis include space pirate Felik of the Slitheen, with this series coinciding with the 20th anniversary of their first appearance. There's also an Adipose called Annie. "I pretty much went down a list of aliens from the show and made my picks," says Watters. "As for other species, we'll have to see, as that'd be telling. But this is an intergalactic prison so anyone who's misbehaved could show up, really."

Watters has also invented some extraterrestrials of his own. "I wanted to throw a few original ones in there because if you have the opportunity to invent a *Doctor Who* alien, you'd be mad not to," he continues. "I'm looking forward to people getting to meet Methelough the Tentaculon, who gets a bit of spotlight in issue two.

"She might be my favourite as she's the one who we made out of whole cloth. The Tentaculons come from a neighbouring planet to the Zygons and are a pretty ferocious species. They also happen to be considered a very delicious species by most of the universe, which has been a bit of an ongoing problem for them!"

With Watters describing him as "a sort of Ship of Theseus done as a cyborg", H-8, meanwhile, is more machine than man. "He's replaced so many bits and pieces over the years that he doesn't remember what bits he started with or what species he was to begin with," he says. "His past with the Daleks mainly entails him cannibalising their broken parts to fit himself. As for the Doctor, you can probably imagine he's going to have a slightly different philosophy of life to a character who dubs himself 'the living gun'."

Doctor Who: The Fifteenth Doctor – The Prison Paradox is out on 5 November.

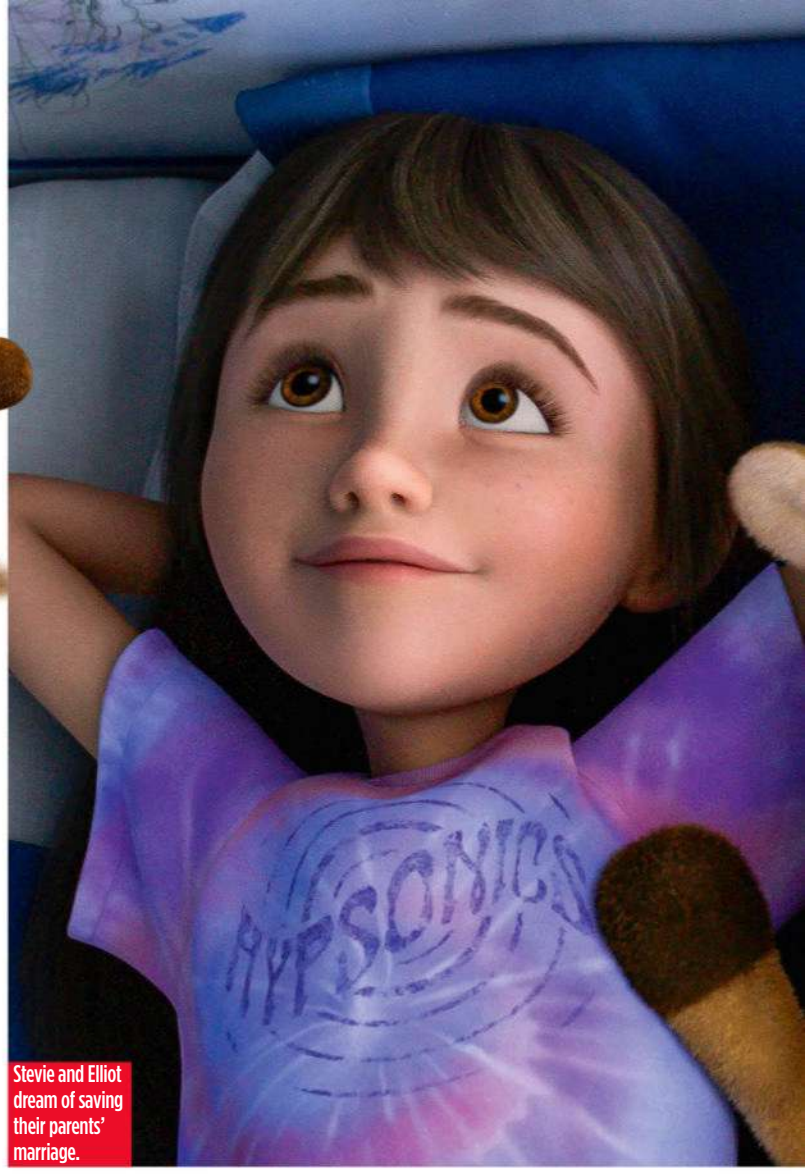
SCI-FACT! **The title comes from the game theory where two individuals end up with worse outcomes by acting in self-interest.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Sweet Dreams

Netflix tackles the Sandman again, but this time as animated film **In Your Dreams**

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**



Stevie and Elliot dream of saving their parents' marriage.

A WHIMSICAL adventure that includes a singing Simu Liu, an original take on the mythical Sandman and laser farts, *In Your Dreams* has a lot going for it. The Netflix animated movie is an enchanting fantasy that follows two siblings (Stevie and her younger brother Elliot) on a magical journey to the world of dreams. Here, it's their mission to seek out the Sandman and ask him to grant them the ultimate wish: the perfect family.

Ah, how sweet. Or is it? What if the quarrelling parents at the heart of the story don't want to save their marriage? "That's a very good question," chuckles *In Your Dreams* writer/director Alex Woo. "That's something we definitely thought about and considered during the writing process. Ultimately, that's not the case in our story. If it were, I think the movie would be very different – but it's a great question and I think that's why we see the parents having challenging conversations at the opening of the film. Those scenes were very difficult to write."

> **"I wanted Sandman to be the giver of positive dreams"**

DREAM ON DREAMER

When it comes to the iconic character of the Sandman, the filmmakers studied Greek mythology and the gods of sleep and dreams, including Hypnos and King Morpheus. Their research also led them through a slew of Sandman stories in movies, TV shows, books and comics.

"Obviously, the Sandman's very popular – and that's mostly because of Neil Gaiman," Woo tells Red Alert. "I love that version of the Sandman, but I wanted to do something very different for this story. Gaiman's version of the character is moody and brooding. Also, he gives nightmares and dreams – but I wanted to separate those two for this tale. I wanted Sandman to be the giver of positive dreams and we created a character called Nightmara to be the giver of nightmares. That was a big difference for us here."

Why make that change? "I wanted to play on the idea of flipping the charges on nightmares and dreams," continues Woo. "Often in life, the worst thing that can happen to you is that you have all your dreams come true and you get everything you want. Sometimes, the best thing that can happen to you can seem like a nightmare at the time. That's one of the key ideas in the movie, which informed a lot of their characters."

Other inspirations for the story include Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro*. "In many ways, *Totoro* is a parallel to our film," explains Woo. "In that story, Satsuki and Mei are dealing with something quite challenging. Their mother's sick, so there's something going on with the parents, right? Then they go off

Jolie Hoang-Rappaport is the voice of Stevie.

There's a lot for viewers to sink their teeth into here...

"Hey, this bit's just like *Bedknobs And Broomsticks*!"

The family unit includes Cristin Milioti as mum and Simu Liu as Dad.

Omid Djalili voices the Sandman (centre).

Elias Janssen provides the voice of younger brother Elliot.

into their own fantasy adventure world. Well, that's similar to the structure of our film. The parents are going through something and then the kids go off into their own fantasy world."

Back To The Future, *The Goonies* and *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* were also touchstones. "*ET* is a big inspiration," confirms Woo. "Even in that film, it's about parents. Elliot's father is never in the picture, but you hear about him on the phone and you know something's going on there. *Back To The Future* is very much about Marty McFly going into some fantasy world and then solving his family's problems through that. It's all similar."

The siblings magically travel into the world of dreams.

SINGING HIS PRAISES

In Your Dreams' cast list includes an international array of actors and comedians, including Omid Djalili as the Sandman, Craig Robinson as Elliot's stuffed toy Baloney Tony, Marvel hero Simu Liu as Dad and *The Penguin* star Cristin Milioti as Mom.

As the father in the story is a musician, the *Shang-Chi And The Legend Of The Ten Rings* star had to prove he had the singing chops for the role. "When we cast Simu, *Shang-Chi* had not come out yet, but I was looking for a Chinese actor to play the part," explains Woo. "Simu's got great comedic timing and he's very likeable, but I didn't know if he could sing, so we had to ask him about it."

Thankfully, Simu was happy to oblige. Woo continues: "I jumped on the phone and said, 'Hey, Simu. Great to meet you! I don't want to offend you, but I need to hear if you can sing.' He replied, 'Oh, I totally get it. This is your baby.' He sent us a singing audition and it was really good. He can hold a tune and that was a big part of our casting. Simu's great."

As for the laser farts in the film, that's all down to co-director and co-writer Eric Benson. "Eric is a comic genius," laughs Woo. "In most family movies, you've got to have one or two fart jokes – but we wanted to do fart jokes that nobody had ever seen before. Hopefully laser farts do the trick."

Exactly how powerful are they? Can a quick parp destroy an entire building? Does a silent-but-deadly reverberate around the dream world? Alex Woo remains tight-lipped on this one. "You'll just have to watch and see," he says with a smile. Bring on the laser madness.

In Your Dreams is on Netflix from 14 November.

SCI-FACT! **Alex Woo worked on several Pixar movies, including *WALL-E* and *Incredibles 2*.**

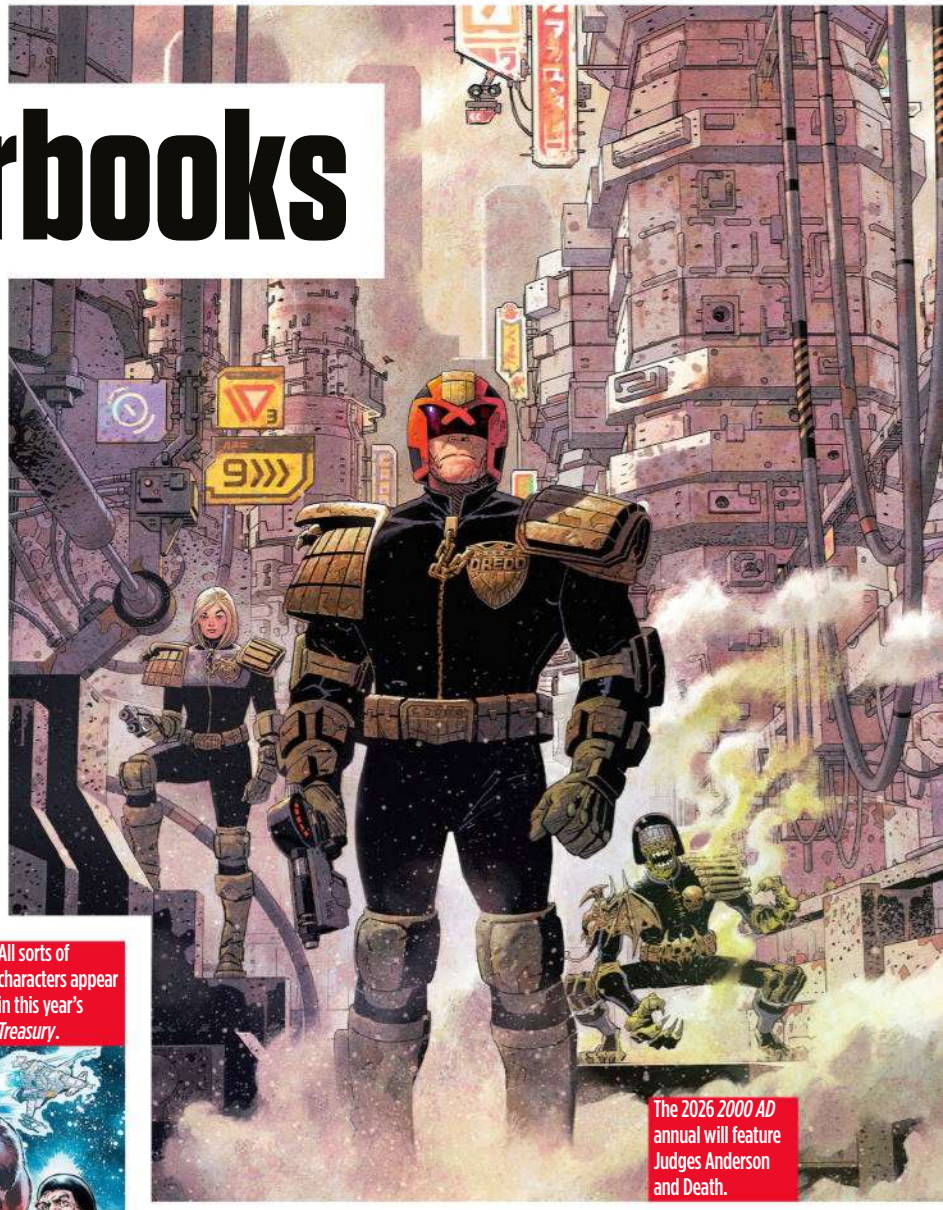
SCI-FACT! **Volume four of Bear Alley Books' *Mytek The Mighty* reprints is also out soon.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Zarjaz Yearbooks

The Treasury Of British Comics and **2000 AD** Annuals 2026 might leave you Scarred For Life

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



The 2026 *2000 AD* annual will feature Judges Anderson and Death.

LIKE ITS *2000 AD* COUNTERPART, this year's *Treasury Of British Comics Annual* again combines classic reprints with new material, teaming up disparate characters from the Fleetway vaults. In their comics debut, Stephen Brotherstone and David Lawrence, along with artist Henrik Sahlstrom, pair *Battle*'s American Civil War mercenary El Mestizo with *Tiger*'s robot gunslinger Helmet Head – both of which would have been right at home in the writers' *Scarred For Life* books about scary pop culture of the '70s and '80s.

"The conditions for inclusion in *Scarred For Life* were dark, gritty, scary, inappropriate or just plain weird and bonkers, and El Mestizo and Helmet Head definitely fit in under gritty and bonkers respectively!" laughs Brotherstone. "We've made Mestizo a cynical, grizzled old mercenary at the end of his career, while Helmet Head is a pure, innocent, kind-hearted robot sheriff at the beginning of his career. Set in 1899, the strip sees a character from a near-obsolete Old West helping a character who represents the shiny new century."

All sorts of characters appear in this year's *Treasury*.

"Thinking about Vanessa from Venus, with her magical powers, it struck me that Spellbinder is perfect to square off against her," continues writer/artist David Roach, who pits the superhero from girls' comic *June* against *Valiant*'s time-travelling magician. "Both are from far-off places, and they both share that amiable but bemused view of the present day, so there's so much scope for confusion and chaos. In Fleetway's '60s/'70s heyday they never would have met, as there were very clear demarcations between boys' and girls' comics, so this was uncharted territory."

Joined by artist Edison Neo, Suyi Davies Okungbowa returns to Mytek the Mighty after first reviving *Valiant*'s robotic ape for the *2020 Smash! Special*. "This story tackles the next natural step after resurrecting Mytek – what does Dunbar Co do with him?" he explains. "My vision is to bring Mytek into an internationalist present, similar to what we see with other supernormal characters. So while Mytek is rediscovered and reactivated in West Africa where he was decommissioned in the old comics, this issue reintroduces him to the world of the present."

With Rob Williams and Joe Currie introducing Judge Christmas, there's a fun, festive quality to the *2000 AD Annual 2026*. "This guy dresses up like Dredd, but with a red and white Santa-styled outfit and breaks into people's homes and gives out presents," laughs Williams. "Kindness, generosity and spreading joy? The Judges aren't going to allow that!"

"Dredd, of course, has a dark undertone towards the humanity and kindness of an individual taking on the Mega-City authority regardless of the consequences," continues Currie, who also partners with writer Maura McHugh on Judge Anderson. "Maybe he's just showing a bit of love towards his family, friends and community, but the law is the law."

"Anderson's genesis is tied to Judge Death, so I was delighted to pit the Dark Judges against a group of counterbalancing Psi-Judges led by her," adds McHugh. "It's the perfect *2000 AD* winter story: darkness descending but with a dash of humour and a star of hope."

The Treasury Of British Comics Annual 2026 and 2000 AD Annual 2026 are out on 12 November.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Nightmare Allies

The xenomorphs are the Axis of Evil in Alien vs Captain America

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE THE RECENT *ALIENS VS Avengers* occurred in the far future, Marvel Comics is journeying back to the Second World War for its next crossover with the xenomorphs, which pits Captain America – during his formative days as a super-soldier – against the deadly creatures.

"When I was first approached about doing an *Alien*/Marvel book, I really wanted to do this as a period piece as it just adds another layer," writer Frank Tieri tells Red Alert. "You don't have as much tech as the modern day, or as much in the way of superpowered heroes like in the regular Marvel universe, so it makes the Aliens an even bigger threat."

The Second World War also makes for an intriguing backdrop. "Especially knowing what the stakes were," continues Tieri. "The Nazis would have done anything to win the war. They explored every advantage, no matter how insane it seemed, whether it was technological, supernatural or maybe even extraterrestrial. So what they do here and ending up using Aliens as weapons would very much be in their wheelhouse."

While, in Tieri's words, Cap encountered all manner of "weird stuff" including "Atlanteans, androids, mutants, vampires and other aliens" even before he went into the ice and woke up in the present-day Marvel Universe, he's never quite encountered a threat like the xenomorphs.

"He's been through the brutality of war at this point but the xenomorphs are brutality on another level," says Tieri. "In many ways, this is actually more of a Captain America-starring horror story than anything."

The four-parter opens with the Red Skull sending Baron Strucker into the Himalayas in search of the fabled city of Attilan and a secret Inhuman weapon, but something far worse is instead discovered in the form of the xenomorphs.

A variant cover for the first issue, by InHyuk Lee.

"So now you've got Hydra looking to use the Aliens against the Allies, which brings in Cap, Bucky and the Howling Commandos as well as something else," teases Tieri. "I won't spoil the surprise on that one yet, but let's say the xenomorphs don't just have history with the Inhumans. And in issue two some other elements are introduced, including some very familiar and surprising faces."

Tieri has also included a few sneaky references. "Even though a lot of the *Alien* stuff takes place a long time after the events of our series, I did manage to sprinkle some cool nods and Easter eggs throughout, and especially at the end," he reveals. "There's some huge 'Oh, shit!' Easter egg stuff there, you'll see!"

Acknowledging that "this isn't exactly an easy series to work on," Tieri is impressed with artist Stefano Raffaele's work. "We go from super creepy horror movie vibes to over-the-top fight scenes and everything in-between, and he rises to the challenge every time," he says.

"Plus he really nails the design work as we have some, let's say, 'different' kinds of xenomorphs here. We also have some Inhuman stuff and some other alien stuff, and it all looks great."

Alien vs Captain America is out on 5 November.

Another cover variant, this one by Paulo Siqueira.

SCI-FACT! **A long-time *Alien* fan, Frank Tieri was a creative consultant on 2024 virtual reality game *Alien: Rogue Incursion*.**

Tiefling cleric Jester and half-orc warlock Fjord.

Nott the Brave in the hands of Beau, a human monk.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Traumatised misfits thrown together for an adventure.

Nein Lives

Return to Exandria with *Vox Machina* spin-off **The Mighty Nein**

WORDS: **WILL SALMON**

GRAB YOUR CLOAK, sword and shield – and don't forget some ale, Nott is gonna want that – because we're headed back to the fantasy world of Exandria. *The Mighty Nein* is a brand-new spin-off of animated show *The Legend Of Vox Machina*. Like that series, *The Mighty Nein* follows a group of adventurers on a quest. Also like that show, it's frequently filthy, violent and full of laughs.

Like its predecessor, *The Mighty Nein* is an adaptation of the hit *Dungeons & Dragons* web series *Critical Role*. In that show, professional voice actors played out lengthy *D&D* campaigns, all under the watchful eye of Dungeon Master Matthew Mercer. The new series adapts *Critical Role*'s second campaign – no mean feat, given how much story there was to get through...

"*The Mighty Nein* was originally done as a live show and ran for 550 hours, or something like that," showrunner Tasha Huo explains. "Which is absolutely crazy, but they built all these amazing characters with incredible backstories."

The series follows a typically mismatched team of adventurers, all voiced by the *Critical Role* team, albeit playing different characters to the heroes they voiced in *Vox Machina*. Stepping into the fray this time around are scatterbrained cleric Jester Lavorre (Laura Bailey), martial arts monk Beau Lionett (Marisha Ray), blood hunter Mollymauk Tealeaf (Taliesin Jaffe), barbarian Yasha Nydoorin (Ashley Johnson), wizard Caleb Widogast (Liam O'Brien), half-orc warlock Fjord Stone (Travis Willingham) and drunken goblin Nott (Sam Riegel). It's a diverse group with a lot of competing priorities, but they'll have to learn to work together as there are monsters on the loose and a kingdom in peril.

"These people absolutely cannot trust each other," laughs Huo. "They're all from completely different worlds and have no business being in the same room, let alone going on an adventure together! They've all come from places of extreme trauma in their lives, and that has shaped them into assholes and misfits and criminals." It turns out, however, that peril is just what they need to bring them together. "Through their adventures they learn how to get over their trauma. That was the element that really brought me to the show. Getting to explore different examples of how we move on and how we grow stronger through our pain is what I love as a writer."

> "It's a diverse group with a lot of competing priorities"

Unlike *The Legend Of Vox Machina*, where the team were already established at the start of the show, we follow these characters as they get to know each other. "These are strangers who meet each other and have to overcome the barriers we all put up to start to become friends. We're making sure you don't have to do homework. We want to make

sure it's accessible to anyone, even someone who has never played *D&D*, or who has no idea what the hell fantasy even is."

Of course, with so much source material to work from, Huo and her team have had to make some story adjustments. "We're telling the story of *The Mighty Nein*," Huo reassures. "But because we have to adapt it for TV, there are going to be differences. There are certain deviations you have to take just to make it fit into a series. It's important to keep the spirit of everything more than it is to keep to the exact plot points.

Critical Role's second caper is brought to life on screen.

It's my hope that when fans of the original watch it, they're getting all the things that they love, just maybe in different ways. It helps to have the original [*Critical Role*] guys in the room when you're doing it, for sure!"

But if all this talk of trauma makes it sound like *The Mighty Nein* is telling a much heavier story than the often light-hearted *Vox Machina*, don't worry. "We pitched this as a grittier show, more cinematic," Huo confirms. "They're both very adult shows, but this one is maybe a bit more elevated in terms of how much character we're going to get into. But the humour is still important. One of the things you hear from everyone, and something I felt while watching the [*Critical Role*] campaign, is the show helped a lot of people through hard times. I remember watching the web series, I would find myself laughing and then crying. They do it so well in *Vox Machina* too, it's just this roller coaster of emotion. Humour is really important to *The Mighty Nein*, even though I wouldn't call it a comedy. The characters are inherently funny. It's important to have light in the darkness."

The Mighty Nein is on Prime Video from 19 November.

SCI-FACT! **The Mighty Nein appeared in an animated ad for D&D Beyond in 2018, which "opened doors" for the *Vox Machina* series.**

SCI-FACT! **Guest contributors to *DIE: The Roleplaying Game* include Adrian Tchaikovsky, Tini Howard and Gene Ha.**

DIE is back – and it's continuing to roll the dice.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

This Is How We Roll

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

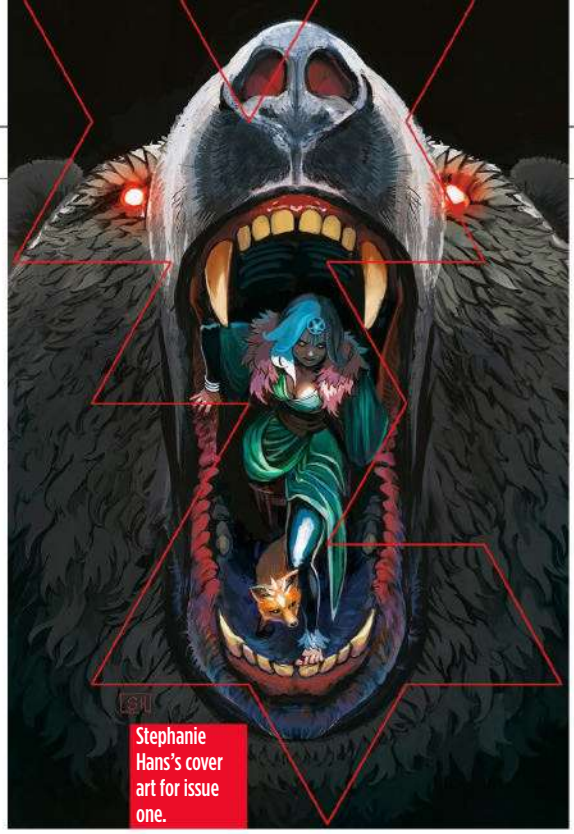
Kieron Gillen and Stephanie Hans role play again with **DIE Loaded**

FROM MARVEL'S NEW STRANGE *Tales* to Dark Horse's *Stranger Things* and *Dungeons & Dragons* crossover, RPGs "feel a bit zeitgeisty" right now according to writer Kieron Gillen, whose like-minded Image title *DIE* with artist Stephanie Hans is returning for second series *DIE Loaded*.

"The idea for *DIE* hit me the same weekend *Stranger Things* debuted, almost as if there's an amoral god outside time and space trying to shape society more to its liking," laughs Gillen. "More seriously? Well, it's been around for a while. It's generational. I knew a revival was on the way in the '00s when I heard that in LA dads were getting competitive over who ran the best games for their kids. People who grew up on it are now in a position to insert it into pop culture, which demystifies it and so makes more people try it. You can see RPGs as the nerd equivalent of folk music, something you do at ground level in small groups. If you're obsessed with all this stuff, RPGs are your way of getting your hands dirty."

"How does *DIE* fit into all that?" adds Hans. "By taking all that seriously and seeing where all that leads for better or worse. *DIE Loaded* specifically is where we lure in people who didn't game before to play, once again, for better or worse."

As its subtitle indicates, the stakes are raised in *DIE Loaded*. "*DIE* is a horror show," teases Gillen. "It throws your obsessions back at you – with knives! Within minutes, we have monstrous surgical hands [helpers] with monstrous hands made of surgical implements. It's all a lot! Ultimately, in *DIE*, the biggest threat is always the friends you meet along the way."



Stephanie Hans's cover art for issue one.

"Graphically, some things and some places will be new, as *DIE* was still very much left half unexplored," continues Hans. "Spoiler alert, we went wild on issue two."

With issue one opening a year after the players came back from the titular dark fantasyland, which they were first transported to as teenagers and then once again as adults in the first series, the survivors gather for the wake of one of their number only to discover that the malevolent game isn't finished with them just yet.

"Everyone's tried to return to their lives and reconnect with the people who they left for two years without warning," explains Gillen. "Ash returned to find his wife Sophie had given birth to a kid when he was away, having an adventure. But Sophie was on one too, as single parenting is as gruelling as anything *DIE* can throw at you."

> **"Some things and some places will be new, as DIE was still very much left half unexplored"**

Alongside issue one, Image are also releasing *DIE: RPG Quickstart Game Guide*, a comic format version of *DIE The Roleplaying Game*, which Gillen promises is accessible to seasoned gamers and newcomers alike. "It's an easy way to start playing, and I'm also including beta rules in the back of the issues themselves," he says. "Seeing people make *DIE* themselves is a joy and also the point. RPGs are punk rock, DIY, open to all."

DIE Loaded and DIE: RPG Quickstart Game Guide are both out on 12 November.

AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

Secret Origins

The Mighty Avengers vs The 1970s leads Bloomsbury's new **Marvel Age Of Comics** line

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

DESCRIBING IT AS "THE BOOK I've always wanted to write," Paul Cornell traces *The Mighty Avengers vs The 1970s* – his contribution to Bloomsbury Books' new *Marvel Age Of Comics* series – to first discovering Earth's Mightiest Heroes through a British reprint in 1973 before purchasing an issue of their original US title a few months later.

"The differences between the two opened up a whole world of exciting questions and that's what addicted me to the Marvel Universe," he explains. "What I'm trying to do with this book is critique superhero comics on their own terms, and write a fun, accessible book about the challenges facing writers working under enormous pressure in a shared universe."

With the Avengers so ubiquitous thanks to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it's hard to fathom that many of the team's line-up – including Scarlet Witch, Ant-Man and Hawkeye – didn't actually have their own titles. "At the time, Marvel readers felt they were tuned into a world that mainstream media ignored almost completely," says Cornell. "It's hard to emphasise enough how little known most Marvel characters were and that 'it's just us' feeling built an enormous sense of community."

Beginning with "the fan-pleasing continuity of exploration" of Roy Thomas – Stan Lee's successor not only as Marvel Editor-in-Chief, but also *Avengers* scripter – before moving onto Steve Englehart's "full-on radicalism" and Jim Shooter's "populism," Cornell also draws parallels with the social and political events of the day. "The Scarlet Witch's status and attitude is almost a barometer of feminism," he says, highlighting Englehart's 1972-74 run, which coincided with the Watergate scandal.

"Englehart started out following in Roy Thomas's shoes with lots of continuity reveals and a little liberal social comment," he continues. "But having landed the ending of his 'Celestial Madonna' saga, he increased the social commentary to the point where the real-life Vice President of the time is a full-on supervillain."

While according to Cornell, "Doctor Strange is his genuine psychedelic mysticism on display, and Avengers is where he shows his conscientious objector radicalism," Englehart's *Avengers* stint overlapped with his spell on the Sorcerer Supreme's adventures, which despite focusing on a solo character, was the more ambitious title. "Of the two, Doctor Strange – strangely – has the larger scope," says Stuart Moore, author of *Doctor Strange: A Decade Of Dark Magic*. "The stories towards the end of his run deal with the death and recreation of the universe and the ascension of mystics to higher planes of existence."

In contrast, Chris Ryall's *Daredevil: Born Again* examines Frank Miller and David Mazzacchelli's classic 1986 storyline. "I not only break down the story itself," says Ryall, "But also get into why I love it so much, and why the comics are so influential and resonant decades later and what kind of impact they've had for the character into the modern day, too."

The Mighty Avengers vs The 1970s, Doctor Strange: A Decade Of Magic and Daredevil: Born Again are out on 13 November.

...WITH RESULTS...
...WHICH WOULD PROVE QUITE FATAL...
KKK
...TO ANY WHOSE BASIC EQUIPMENT DID NOT INCLUDE AN IN-BUILT SYSTEM OF ULTRA-SHOCK ABSORBERS!
AS IT IS... WELLLL...
15

SCI-FACT! **Out mid-2026, the next three volumes explore *Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, *Wolverine: Weapon X* and *The Ultimates*.**

Plemons plays Teddy, who thinks his boss is an alien.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Office Space

Emma Stone and Jesse Plemons star in Yorgos Lanthimos's out-of-this-world comedy-drama **Bugonia** WORDS: **JAMES MOTTRAM**

IS THERE ANYBODY out there? It's a question you'll be asking after watching *Bugonia*, the latest madcap movie from Greek-born master of weird Yorgos Lanthimos. The director of *The Lobster* and *Poor Things* is back with his first remake, a wild take on 2003's South Korean movie Save *The Green Planet!* Emma Stone plays Michelle, a callous CEO who's kidnapped by one of her low-grade employees, Teddy (Jesse Plemons), and his cousin Don (Aidan Delbis), the former fully convinced that Michelle is an alien from Andromeda and is out to destroy Earth.

"There's a lot of layers in the film," says Lanthimos, who's worked from a script by Will Tracy (*Succession*). "The surface of it is conspiracy theories, but for me I think the world today, and technology especially, just encloses us into these very tight bubbles, and it just reinforces what you already believe, and it's hard to get out of it. So the film is structured in that way. You have these typical characters you think you know, but minute after minute, various layers are revealed. You don't even know who to root for at times."

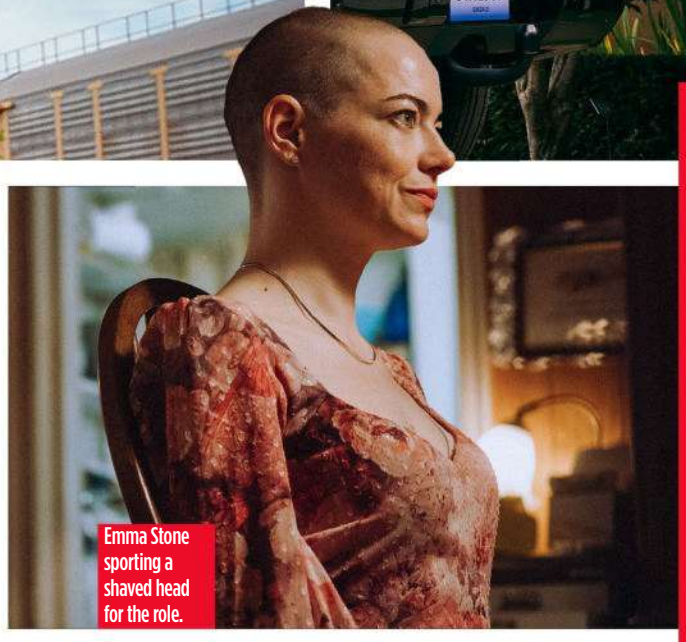
It's as much a corporate satire, dealing with how companies pillage the planet for profit, as it is a sci-fi. But from Plemons's point of view, he had no choice but to dive into alien conspiracy theories. "One of my longtime friends, Trevor, that I met in Austin, is the biggest alien enthusiast," he reveals. "He probably believes he is one! I love him so much. I don't know if he's ever been happier having someone just ask him about when it formed, what was going on in his life when this almost-religious moment [happened] of acknowledging that now I believe they exist."

Trevor aside, web forums were also the ideal rabbit hole to venture down. "The internet's a pretty wild place that just gives you what you're looking for once you start asking the right questions," adds Plemons. Also helpful was Naomi Klein's 2023 memoir *Doppelganger: A Trip Into The Mirror World*. "That book was terrifying at the beginning, and then the further I got into it, I started to feel some comfort, because she just gives you some clarity in the chaos of the world." Dealing with how conspiracy theories manifest, "It forces you to look at the ways in which you can also fall into these traps. None of us are really above this."

> **"Plemons had no choice but to dive into alien conspiracies"**

Giving the film further edge, Tracy decided to gender-flip the CEO, something Stone welcomes. "I think the ambiguity of that is really fascinating," argues the actor, now on her fourth film with Lanthimos. "Being a woman,

Is Stone's pharmaceutical CEO really from beyond Earth?



Emma Stone sporting a shaved head for the role.

Kidnapping might just be a fireable offence...

these two men taking her and tying her up in a basement immediately becomes pretty intense, and there's obviously a lot of questions around that that are answered throughout the film, which I think is also fascinating. I don't want to give anything away, but there's all kinds of things that are going on."

While it's her character that bears the brunt of Teddy's possible madness, Stone understands our need to believe in a higher power, be it aliens or an abstract deity. "It's a story since the birth of mankind, since we needed to start telling stories, since religion began, since we've all needed someone to tell us what to do, because we're stranded out here on this planet alone and we're trying to make sense of what life is supposed to be, what it means. You tell me this story, I can believe that. I can hold onto that. That will give me some sense of balance in this insanity," she says.

The real abductors are cousins Teddy and Don.

Plemons, who previously won Best Actor in Cannes for Lanthimos's divisive anthology *Kinds Of Kindness*, felt the same while shooting and chatting with his chum, Trevor. "It's this feeling of, 'Please let there be more than what I can see right now. Let there be a god, alien gods or someone else that's pulling some strings.' I think that's a double-edged sword that can go in a really dark direction, but also through myth and stories, which have been around since the beginning of time, you can learn about yourself. This is just what it is to be human."

Lanthimos isn't about to put a definitive stamp on what *Bugonia* means, but he alludes to a forceful monologue spoken to Stone's character, "which talks about humanity and the suicidal gene" and how we're on a collision course towards disaster. "Some of it is fictionalised, of course, but a lot of it is very true. It's very much about the course that we're taking, an alarm ringing of where we're going – and what human nature actually is. Is there a way to eliminate the suicide gene?" Answers on a postcard, please...

Bugonia is in cinemas from 7 November.

SCI-FACT! ***Hereditary*** **and** ***Midsommar*** **director Ari Aster commissioned the script, loving the Korean movie, and remains a producer here.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Bunny Talks

Ke Huy Quan joins a crazy cast of animals – alongside a hair-raising horse – in **Zootropolis 2** WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

Nine years since the original, Judy and Nick are back.

PREPARE FOR A TRULY wild animated adventure when *Zootropolis 2* roars into cinemas. The follow-up to the 2016 Disney film – which is also known as *Zootopia*, *Zoomania* and *Zootopie* in other parts of the world – is jam-packed with fur-raising fun and a stack of wise-cracking new creature characters.

When it comes to the newcomers for the sequel, top of the list is a 10 metre-long pit viper called Gary (voiced by *The Goonies* and *Indiana Jones* actor Ke Huy Quan). Fans of the first film might recall that there were no reptiles in the plot. Instead, the narrative focused on mammals; specifically the relationship between an optimistic rabbit, Judy Hopps (Ginnifer Goodwin), and a super-sly fox, Nick Wilde (Jason Bateman).

"For *Zootopia 2*, we knew we were going to bring reptiles into the story," says the movie's writer/co-director Jared Bush. "What would be a type of reptile that would make mammals the most nervous? For a lot of us, there is a built-in fear of snakes, so we knew it had to be a snake. An extremely dangerous snake is even better. How about making the most dangerous snake ever the sweetest character in the entire movie? That's where our thought process took us."

Bush – who has served as the chief creative officer of Walt Disney Animation Studios since 2024 – fondly recalls the recording booth experience with Ke Huy Quan. The actor won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in 2023 for *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, where his fight scenes and stunts blew audiences away.

"Maybe we have a fight scene in this movie that Gary is involved with," teases Bush. "It was just incredible to say to Ke, 'Hey, we need you to do a bunch of fight sound choreography.' All that work he did in *Everything Everywhere All At Once* – when he does those noises, he has to act them out. He's done a lot of fight choreography over the years, so he's doing all kinds of craziness in the booth."

A stallion, Mayor Winddancer (Patrick Warburton), is another key character added to the sequel.

> **"We knew we were going to bring reptiles into the story"**

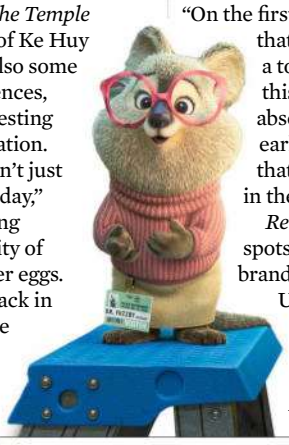
There's a whole new roster of animals on show.

"This was one of our biggest surprises," explains Bush. "We went through a number of different animal options for the new mayor. At first it was going to be an elephant, and then it was going to be an aggressive Aussie kangaroo, which was hilarious. Then it was going to be a really tall giraffe that you could never hear because he couldn't reach the microphone. Eventually, one of our amazing visible development artists, Ami Thompson, said, 'How about a horse?'"

It turns out a horse was perfect. Bush continues: "I remember thinking, 'Of all the animals, why would we put a horse in this movie?' And then she showed us Mayor Winddancer. She said, 'He's a former actor turned politician.' He's a scene stealer in everything he does."

The creative team have strived to inject as much humour – and as many Easter eggs – into the story as possible. Eagle-eyed viewers, keep them eyes peeled for an *Indi-Lama Jones And The Pre-Dooming Of The Temple* poster, in honour of Ke Huy Quan. There are also some very British references, including an interesting twist on a Tube station.

"Our mystery isn't just set in the modern day," adds Bush, speaking about the possibility of more British Easter eggs. "It actually goes back in time to some of the creation of Zootropolis. In that time, you may see what the ZBD [Zootropolis Business District] looked like back then. It really feels like it's from a century ago."



Pun lovers are also in for a treat. "I do love a pun," chuckles Bush. "On the first film, we got a note that said, 'You can have a total of five puns in this movie.' This is absolutely true. It was early on. We disregarded that note and put a billion in there."

Red Alert's favourite spots include iconic fashion brands such as Gnucci, Urban Snoutfitters and Tommy Swillfigure, a Cattlelac car, a Snarly Davidson and a Barns And Noble shop. "I think there are a lot of people at Disney who love puns," continues Bush. "Cory Loftis is our production designer. He also loves them and he's in charge of all the signage you see in-world. You'll see a ton of advertisements and brand labels. It is aggressive and we love it."

What are Bush's favourites? "At one point, Nick Wilde goes on something called HuluZoo, which is a streaming service," he concludes. "You'll see a lot of different tiles of the different shows that he watches. I don't want to spoil what they are, but everything in there is a gem. Pay close attention."

Zootropolis 2 is in cinemas from 28 November.

The sequel sees the two go undercover.

Patrick Warburton voices Brian Winddancer.

SCI-FACT! ***Zootropolis*** **won an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature – Bush personally pitched it to Disney's CEO, Bob Iger.**

NYCC PANEL REPORT

Joust The Ticket

Game Of Thrones continues in new prequel series **A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms**

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

Northern Ireland again stands in for Westeros.

WITH AN EARLY 2026 RELEASE date quickly approaching, the finer details of *A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms* are finally starting to land, including some head-swerving teases from the cast and crew. What's in store for *Game Of Thrones* fans? For starters, the six-part spinoff will incorporate a grittier and more grounded tone than its predecessors, as well as some of the most intense, ass-kicking medieval action seen on the small screen.

The highly-anticipated HBO series is based on George RR Martin's novellas about a hedge knight called Ser Duncan the Tall, aka Dunk (played by Peter Claffey), and his young squire, Egg (Dexter Sol Ansell). The story is set a century before *Game Of Thrones*, in a time where the Targaryen line still holds the Iron Throne.

In the words of showrunner Ira Parker, "Following Dunk on this journey, we've never had this perspective before. He is somebody who grew up in the slums of King's Landing as an orphan who didn't have a name, didn't have an inheritance and didn't have any money. He also didn't have the best training in the world. He's just trying to make it. He's trying to go out and do something hard that he's never done before. He's out of his comfort zone. Hopefully, a lot of that will resonate with our audience."

Parker promises the action and tone of the show will be strikingly different to its *GOT* forerunners. "This is not the big, sprawling *Game Of Thrones* we've come to know and love," he explains. "This is close and this is intimate. This is brutal and this is hard. This is exactly what it would have been like."

This new outlook means viewers are going to be placed in the thick of the arduous, mud-thumping action – warts and all. "We want the audience to feel what Dunk feels," adds Parker. "We want to be with him as closely as possible."

Author George RR Martin, who is credited as co-creator of the show, visited the sprawling

Ser Duncan the Tall (Peter Claffey): he is, you know.

George RR Martin (second left) with cast and crew.

CRAIG BARRITT/GETTY FOR REEDPOP

set in 2024 and was elated by everything he saw. "Somewhere north of Belfast, in the wilds of Northern Ireland, they had the whole tourney at Ashford Meadow laid out," he explains. "There were wonderful grounds and tents and jousting pavilions. There's nothing like that feeling to see something that only exists in your head suddenly come to life."

Martin says that his love of medieval tournaments served as a prime inspiration for the story. "Of course, we had several tournaments in *Game Of Thrones* – but they're in the background," says Martin. "They were not the centre. I wanted to do something that's entirely set during a tournament, because I find them very exciting. I set them [the filmmakers] a challenge. I said, 'Let's do the best jousting sequences that have ever been put on film.'"

> **"This is close and this is intimate. This is brutal and this is hard"**

The 1952 movie *Ivanhoe* features Martin's previous favourite on-screen medieval tournament. "Elizabeth Taylor, George Sanders, Robert Taylor," he recites. "They don't have many jousting sequences, but what they have are really good. I think we did really well in our version."

"The jousting was a lot of fun," adds Parker. "We also did something that hopefully no one's ever seen before, which is a jousting tournament at night. It looks badass. I'm very excited for everybody to see that."

With only six 30-minute episodes in season one, the scripts are expected to be focused and tight. And with a narrative concentrated on Dunk's attempts to enter an important jousting contest, it's clear from Martin's comments that the medieval tournament will be seen in all its gritty glory. Speaking about his favourite episodes of the first season at New York Comic-Con, the author explains: "I'm prejudiced, but episode five is very potent. That's the big action episode. I think the way they did it was superb.

"That being said, I'm even more impressed with the final episode of the show, because the battle is over by then and the big twist has been revealed. This is an epilogue episode. It's the aftermath that shows people dealing with the emotional resonance of what happened in episode five."

Ser Duncan actor Peter Claffey has an intense memory about the scene he was most excited to see come to life. "I'm on horseback and I had a hell of a lot of things to say," he reveals. "We'd done it during the audition process and I remember thinking, 'This is the true monologue of Dunk, trying to implore people to do whatever.'

"When that came around to shoot, I was quite nervous – but when we finished, I probably wasn't allowed to but I took off on the horse. My adrenaline was flowing, and I took out my sword and screamed. It sounds cringey talking about it now, but that was my favourite scene."

A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms is on Sky and NOW from 19 January in the UK, and HBO/HBO Max from 18 January in the US.

SCI-FACT! **George RR Martin gave away key origin information about one of the main characters at NYCC, to much rumbling from the crowd!**

SCI-FACT! **Rivalling *Wicked: For Good* in the merchandise stakes, *Stranger Things* also has Lego and Care Bears collaborations.**

Precious Things

Hawkins has taken over Primark, with a brand new official *Stranger Things* range. There's a staggering 80 pieces in the collection, from clothes to beauty products to home goods – yes, we'll be picking up the Upside Down Scented Candle and we hope it smells *rotten*. But you don't just get to dress and smell like the show, you can eat like it too in themed Primark *Stranger Things* cafes in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Glasgow, Manchester and Birmingham. **Visit primark.co.uk.**

Green Piece

The release of *Wicked: For Good* brings with it an onslaught of merchandise that would make *Star Wars* do a double take, from cleaning products to couture. Of particular note/kitsch value are the various de rigueur Lego tie-ins and a Care Bears collaboration. **Available from lego.com and smythstoys.com.**

Back To Black

Another month, another selling incentive/vinyl offer. This time it's Black Friday Record Store Day, which is apparently a thing now, on 28 November. But hurrah for nerds as in the UK we've got both a *Doctor Who* release, 2010 audiobook *The Last Voyage*, and Alan Silvestri's music for *The Back To The Future Trilogy*.

NEW AUTHOR

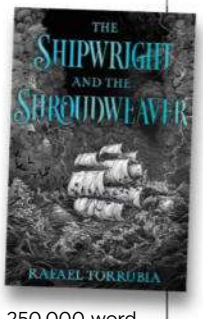
RAFAEL TORRUBIA

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND *THE SHIPWRIGHT AND THE SHROUDWEAVER*

CAROLINE BAPTISTA

Tell us about your protagonists.
→ Shipwright and Shroudweaver are well-worn lovers; veterans of a reckless revolution against a monstrous, ice-bound tyrant. Reeling from that bloody war, they're caught in a desperate race to save the world again, haunted by a wider cast of old friends, old flames and desperate choices.

How does magic operate in this world?
→ Shroudweaver uses thread and ritual to bind souls into objects, or cast them forth. Shipwright crafts strange brass spinners, which drive the natural electricities of the body towards incredible feats. There are also older magics...



How long did the book take to write?
→ Over a decade! I wrote it alongside teaching protest history and caring for my father. It began as a short story, which became a 99,000 word submission, then a 250,000 word final manuscript.

Did you do much in the way of research?
→ Fantasy books thrive on real-life colour. The underground city of Derinkuyu fed into the mountain revolutionaries of Thell, and there are echoes of the Cladh Hallan bog bodies, and Orkney's Tomb of the Eagles in the carnal magic of my "villain", Crowkisser.

Got any advice for budding authors?
→ Read everything – the wildest parts of this book were inspired by Sorley MacLean poems, 18th century horticultural journals, or walking down a burn in the dead of night.

The Shipwright And The Shroudweaver is out on 27 November, from Gollancz.

Season three of **Daredevil: Born Again** has officially got the green light, with filming set to begin next year. Krysten Ritter dusts down Jessica Jones's leather jacket in season two.

Rebecca Ferguson will return as Lady Jessica in **Dune: Part Three**.

NEWSWARP

Breaking Genre News!

Star Trek: Starfleet Academy begins enrolling 15 January. Stephen Colbert is voicing the Digital Dean of Students.

The White Lotus' Brittany O'Grady and *Torchwood*'s Burn Gorman are signed for the next **Jumanji** movie, currently targeting a December 2026 release.

Warner Bros Animation is bringing **Batman: Knightfall** to the screen in a multi-part adaptation. The classic '90s comic book saga saw a Bane-broken Dark Knight replaced by the psychotic Azrael.

Lee Pace joins season four of **Invincible** as Thragg, Grand Regent of the Viltrum Empire. Nice work if you can get it...

Disney+ is developing **Afterlife With Archie**, reimagining Riverdale as a zombie-ridden apocalyptic hellscape. *Chilling Adventures Of Sabrina* creator Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa is onboard as writer and executive producer.

The Weeping Woman returns in **The Revenge Of La Llorona**, starring Jay Hernandez and Monica Raymund. Santiago Menghini directs.

Heads up, chicken jockeys – **A Minecraft Movie 2** arrives 23 July 2027.

X-Men '97 has been renewed for a third season with season two arriving next summer, pitting the mutants against Apocalypse.

Zach Cherry, Kali Reis and Johnno Wilson are joining the **Resident Evil** reboot, directed by *Weapons* helmer Zach Cregger and released 18 September 2026.

Zach Galifianakis and Dolly Wells are joining **Very Young Frankenstein**, a prequel series to the Mel Brooks spoof.

Jeremy Irons is the latest mortal to join the **Highlander** reboot. He'll play the leader of a secret order known as the Watchers, who believe the immortals are a menace to mankind. WWE star Drew McIntyre plays Angus, brother to Henry Cavill's Connor MacLeod.

A sequel to **The Simpsons Movie** arrives 23 July 2027, 20 years after the original put Springfield beneath the dome.

Andor's Denise Gough joins Greta Gerwig's **Narnia: The Magician's Nephew**.

The Witch producer Jay Van Hoy is developing a big-screen adaptation of Stephen King novella **The Rat**.

Netflix will bring us **Pagans**, a new supernatural drama series from Joshua Zetumer, creator of *Say Nothing*.

Battlestar Galactica's Mary McDonnell joins the cast of Marvel's **VisionQuest** series.

Anna Sawai, John Boyega and John Cho are among the voice cast of animated feature **Slime**, pitched as an "anime-inspired pre-apocalyptic sci-fi monster flick with retro videogame sensibilities." Would it kill you to be a little more specific?

Add another miscreant to **Spider-Man: Brand New Day**. Marvin Jones III is Tombstone, a character he previously voiced in the *Spider-Verse* movies.

Pamela Anderson's production company And-Her-Sons (geddit?) is developing a TV version of **Barb Wire**, the Dark Horse Comics bounty hunter she brought to the big screen in 1996.

Tron: Ares helmer Joachim Rønning is developing sea-based thriller **Here Be Monsters**, rumoured to be a maritime spin on *Alien* and *The Thing*.

Nope's Brandon Perea will star in the next instalment of the **Insidious** saga.

Scarlett Johansson is in the frame to play Mother Gothel in Disney's live-action **Tangled**.

DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN © MARVEL. DUNE: PART TWO © WARNER BROS. SCARLETT JOHANSSON PHOTO © JC OLIVERA/VARIETY VIA GETTY. TANGLED: ENTERTAINMENT PICTURES/ALAMY.

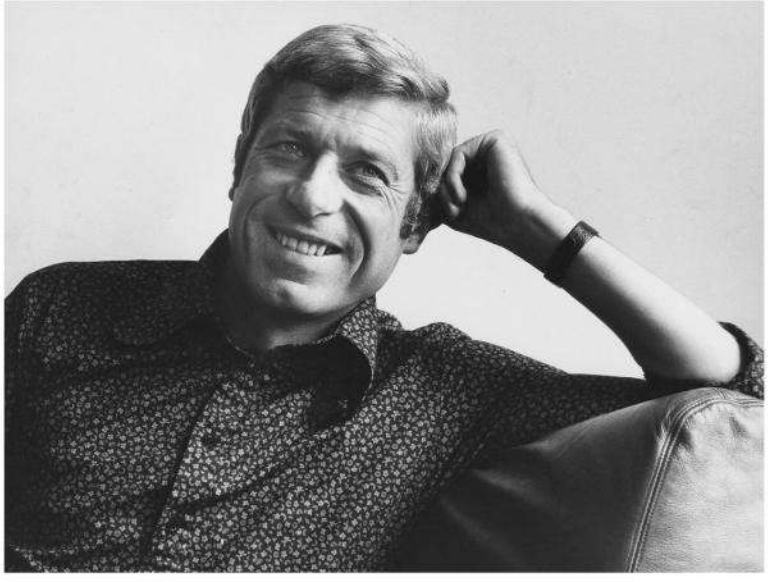
SCI-FACT! John Woodvine reprised the role of *An American Werewolf In London*'s Dr Hirsch in 1997's Radio 1 adaptation.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

JOHN WOODVINE 1929-2025

The man behind *Doctor Who*'s Marshal

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



DON SMITH/RADIO TIMES/GETTY

HE WAS NEVER A STAR BUT John Woodvine was part of the firmament: a familiar, commanding presence whose talent enriched countless productions over a long and acclaimed career.

Born in the Tyne Dock area of South Shields, Woodvine worked in the wool industry before training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Graduating in 1953, he joined the Old Vic and later proved a compelling stage actor with the RSC and the English Shakespeare Company, winning an Olivier Award in 1987.

His rich voice, strong features and cool blue gaze gave him an edge and a gravitas that helped ground the more fantastical entries on his resume. He appeared in four episodes of *The Avengers* in the '60s, playing an assortment of characters as the series shifted from gritty spy and crime drama to surrealist fantasy, and was Lt Kruger Haller in *The Champions* episode "The Search".

In 1975 Woodvine appeared in "The Other Window", a haunting, time-bending instalment of the children's supernatural anthology series *Shadows*, co-written by JB Priestley. 1979 found him playing the Marshal of Atrios, the memorably hawkish antagonist in "The Armageddon Factor", concluding story of *Doctor Who*'s Key To Time saga.

In *An American Werewolf In London* (1981) Woodvine was Dr Hirsch, the physician who arrives at the Slaughtered Lamb to investigate the attacks on the backpackers. 1985 saw him play Master 468 in season two of *The Tripods*, while 1987's *Knights Of God* gave him his most chillingly authoritarian role: Prior Mordrin, founder of a fascistic religious order.

Woodvine fronted Radio Four's comedy horror *The Cabaret Of Dr Caligari* in 1991, and was Galileo alongside Paul McGann's Doctor in 2015 audio drama *Doctor Who: Doom Coalition*. 2022's folk horror *Enys Men* marked his final screen appearance.

RM FLAVIO MASSARI / ALAMY

RENATO CASARO 1935-2025

One of the true titans of movie art, Renato Casaro was reputed to have painted over 2,000 film posters. Born in Treviso in northern Italy, his evident talents were encouraged by a teacher. He later persuaded local cinema owners to give him unwanted posters to study and reproduce. Opening his own studio at 21, he was hired by mogul Dino De Laurentiis to design the posters for John Huston's epic *The Bible: In The Beginning...* (1966).

As seen in his work for *Flash Gordon* (1980) and *Conan The Barbarian* (1982), Casaro favoured a lush but muscular style. "I have always had a weakness for heroes," he once confessed. He had the honour of illustrating both of the duelling Bond films of 1983 – *Octopussy* (collaborating with Dan Goozee) and *Never Say Never Again* – and created equally striking imagery for *The NeverEnding Story* (1984), *Total Recall* (1990) and *Army Of Darkness* (1992).

SERGIO SALVATI 1934-2025

"The most important thing is to love the cinema you're making," believed cinematographer Sergio Salvati, who enjoyed a long and memorable collaboration with Italian goremeister Lucio Fulci.

Born in Trastevere, Rome, Salvati was the son of Adolfo, a key grip. With industry contacts he secured an apprenticeship developing negatives in a photo lab in Rome, then progressed to camera operator on 1958's *Raw Wind In Eden*, a role he also performed on Sergio Leone's classic Spaghetti Western *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly* (1966).

Salvati was director of photography on such Fulci movies as *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (1979), *City Of The Living Dead* (1980) and *The House By The Cemetery* (1981). The pair were in sync creatively: "We got along perfectly in everything, from the staging to the lighting to the camera positions," Salvati recalled.

Other credits include Charles Band productions *Crawlspace* (1986), *Ghoulies II* (1987) and *Puppet Master* (1989).

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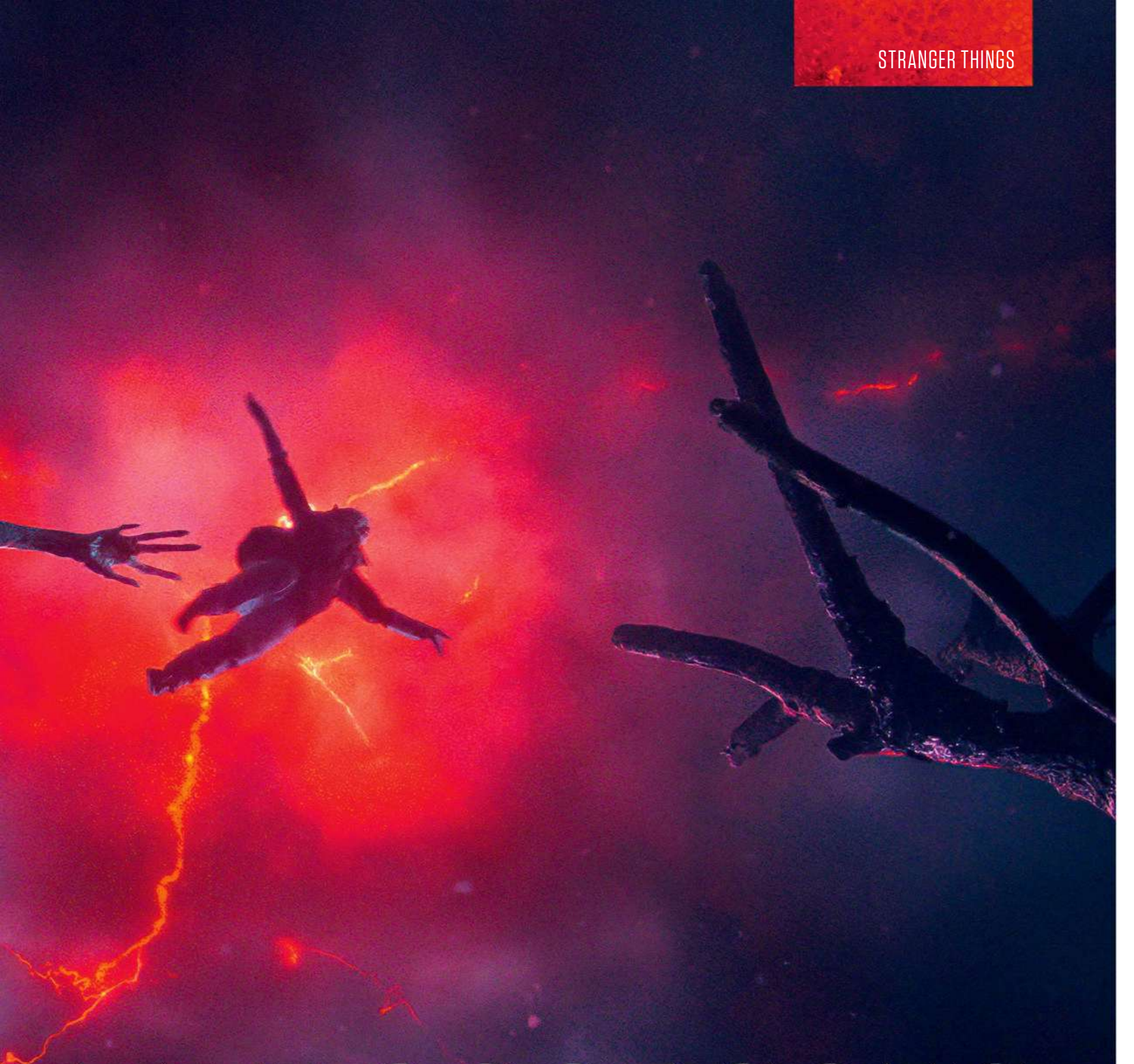
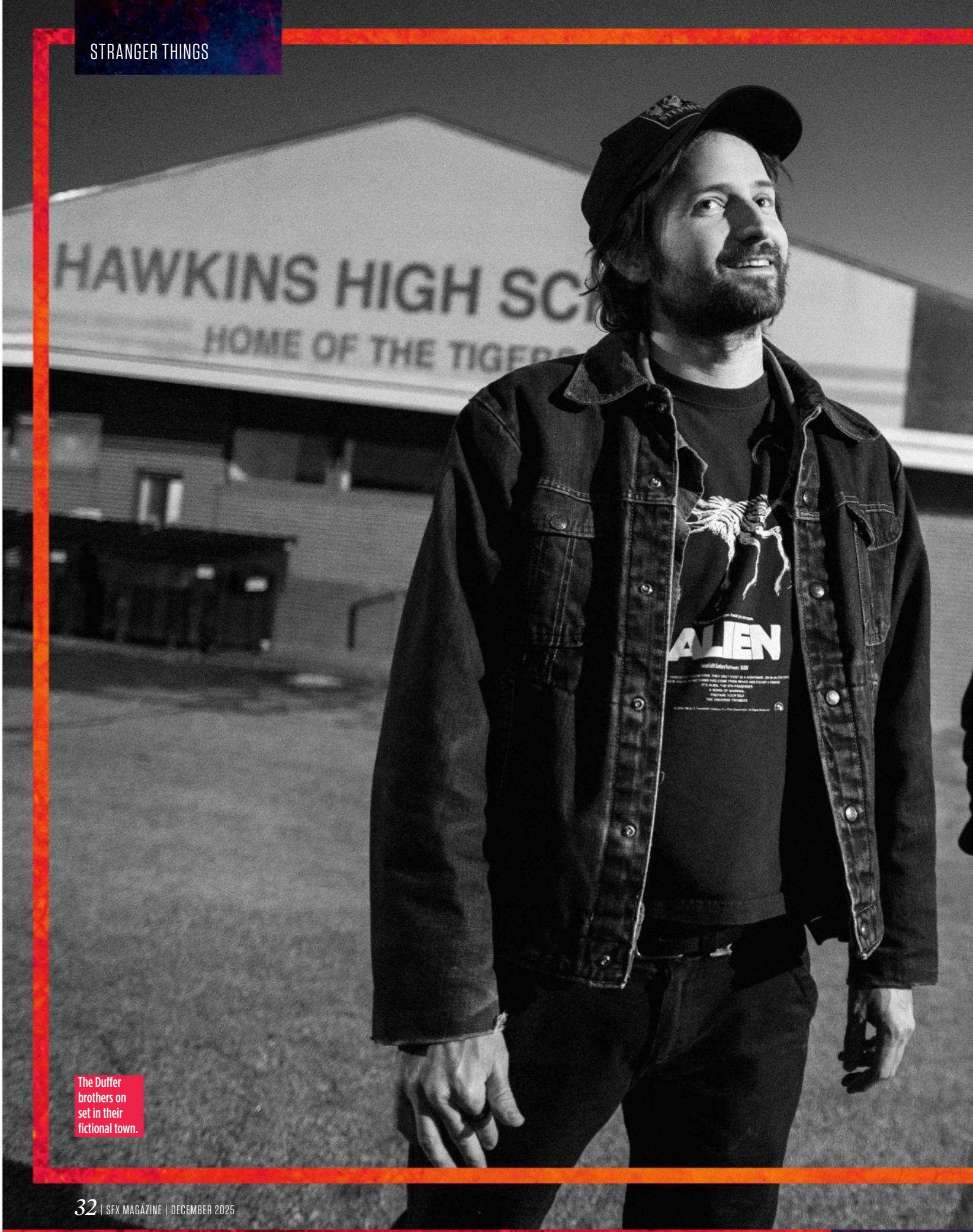
DUNGEONS



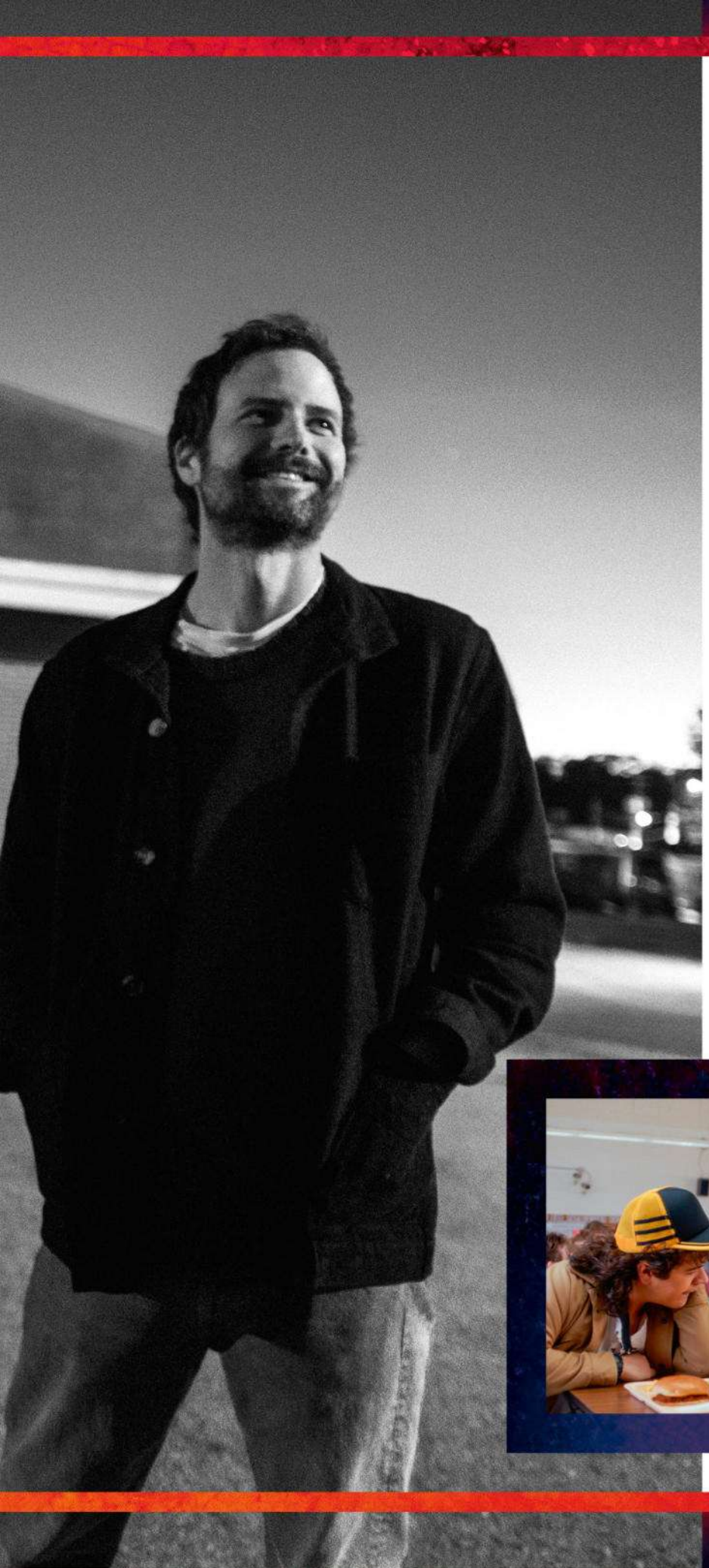
DEMOGORGONS

THE END OF STRANGER THINGS IS NIGH. SFX MEETS THE SHOW'S CREATORS, THE DUFFER BROTHERS, ABOUT SAYING GOODBYE TO HAWKINS – FOR GOOD

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**



The Duffer brothers on set in their fictional town.



STRANGER THINGS' FINAL SEASON has been a long time coming. A really long time. So much so that the kids – if you can call them that – are all grown up. Millie Bobby Brown, who plays Eleven, has married a Bongiovi and adopted a child; Caleb McLaughlin (Lucas) recently celebrated his 24th birthday; Finn Wolfhard (Mike) released an album of indie-rock tracks and toured North America with his band between seasons of the show.

"It's okay," Ross Duffer, one half of the show's creating duo, the Duffer brothers, assures *SFX* after we apologise for referring to his adult cast as kids. "I still call them kids, too."

It's hard not to when we've seen the five of them, rounded out by Gaten Matarazzo (Dustin) and Noah Schnapp (Will), grow up on screen. The series debuted on Netflix all the way back in 2016, and now, after multiple delays caused by actors and writing strikes, we return to the Upside Down for a new season, one that truly hits the ground running.

"It's a very different start than we've ever had," Ross, sitting beside his twin brother, Matt, explains. "Normally, at the end of the previous season, they've defeated whatever evil, and so we start with them going about their normal lives when something comes in, and that sets off our mystery. But in this case, they lost at the end of season four, and so when we find them, they're training and preparing and searching for Vecna. They're active from the beginning, so it allows things to get off to a much quicker start than ever before."

Last season, the gang were on the back foot, the villainous Vecna, AKA Henry Creel, AKA One, having managed to bridge the gap →

Dustin, Mike, Will and Lucas remain at the story's heart.

PICTURES © ANDREW COOPER, MATT KENNEDY, ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA, NIKO TAVERNISE/NETFLIX

Filming – set and location – is mostly done in Georgia.

Practical effects come to the fore in interior shots.

A physically demanding scene in motion.

A "MEGA MOVIE"

The Duffers explain why the release has been split into three parts

Mike becomes more of a leader this season.

Season five has been split into three parts, the first four episodes (Volume One) coming on 26 November, followed by three more episodes (Volume Two) on Christmas Day, and the finale on New Year's Eve – and unlike the split in season four, this time, the Duffers knew it was coming.

"I'm also excited about the first volume because, in season four, we weren't aware that it was going to get split in two," Ross says. "It's not Netflix's fault, it's nobody's fault. There was the pandemic, and we ended up dividing it in two so we could get episodes out sooner. But this time, we knew we were going to divide it into two, so it really is in two halves. Volume One really exists as its own mega-movie. It has its own climax. So episode four [titled "Sorcerer"] is pretty fucking massive. It's definitely the hardest thing that we've ever done on a technical level. Episode four was the most challenging episode we've ever made, and that includes the finale – though on an emotional level, the finale was the hardest. I don't know how many days I found myself crying, and I'm not someone who cries very often outside of watching Pixar movies."

between Hawkins and the mysterious, haunting dimension known as the Upside Down. The final episode ended with Max (Sadie Sink) in a coma; Eleven, Mike, Will, Hopper (David Harbour), Joyce (Winona Ryder), Nancy (Natalia Dyer) and Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) looking out over their home town as smoke bellows from below; and Lucas, Dustin, Steve (Joe Keery), and Robin (Maya Hawke) watching the sky turn to ash.

FIVE ALIVE

Season five takes place 18 months later, with the devastated Hawkins having been placed in quarantine, segregated from the rest of the world, the army enforcing a lockdown. But despite the military presence, our heroes – who are finally together again in a single location – are persevering in their fight against Vecna. To go into too many specifics risks putting Netflix's spoiler snipers on alert; all you need to know is that, by the time the first episode finishes, the action is in full swing, and a new mystery, one that puts us on a collision course

Stone Mountain Park was one location.

Steve's BMW is going to prove useful this season.

with the Upside Down's otherworldly ghouls, has begun to unravel.

"We didn't have to leave anything off the table this year," Matt says. "That's what was so fun about writing this season in particular, because we could reveal every layer of the mystery. A lot of it, we've been holding back. This time, we could have Hawkins go to hell, basically, without ruining any future season. There was a lot of freedom in terms of what we could do, which hasn't been true of the other seasons."

Stranger Things started life as a limited series, the Duffers pitching a show about a few kids who become embroiled in a mystery. Then Netflix entered the room and asked them to think bigger. "When we pitched to Netflix, we knew that they weren't interested in a limited series, so when we were making season one, we knew that in success, it would continue, and so we purposely held back certain mysteries," Ross explains. "The biggest one from season one was about what the Upside Down actually is, which is something we've known now for almost 10 years. We've thought about revealing it every time we write a season, and we just kept holding it back and holding it back. It was exciting this season to be able to finally reveal what the Upside Down is, and it plays a huge role in the narrative, that final mystery of what it is, and what it all means."

As much as the duo have held back on the answer to that central mystery, Matt says their approach to writing each season has never been about keeping secrets from viewers. "From season one onwards, we've tried to put everything out there," he says. "We always try to make the coolest season possible, and with the exception of holding back on the Upside Down, we try to put everything on the table. We view each season more as a long-form movie. Not that we're not taking mythology into account, or the slow-drip reveal of the mythology, but the focus has always been to try to tell the best story we can."

"Most mysteries that have been unresolved so far in the show are related to the Upside Down," continues Ross. "To finally be able to reveal all that was very satisfying. And it leads to some pretty spectacular set-pieces and visual effects that we're really proud of."

Some plot points in season five, he admits, have been bouncing around since the first season of *Stranger Things*, but many of the big-picture ideas were formed during the making of the second season, when the brothers could see how audiences were responding to their '80s-set world. "That was really when we saw that the show was a success and that it would probably go on for a few seasons," Matt says. "That's when we started to really break down the mythology

Continued on page 40

THE PALADIN

Finn Wolfhard talks Mike stepping back into the leadership role

After professing his love to Eleven, Mike's ready to lead the gang as they take on Vecna – but this time, his family are drawn into the action in a bigger way than ever before. "It becomes personal in a lot of ways," Finn Wolfhard tells *SFX*. "There's the classic action, but now it's personal."

How's Mike feeling at the start of this season? The town of Hawkins is in quarantine from the rest of the world, which must have a big impact on him.

☆ We're all pretty stir crazy. We're in mission mode, where we are on a mission to end this suffering that Vecna has imposed on our group and the town, and the world. His plan is to dominate everything and the best way I could describe it is that we are all seeing red. We're all just on a mission to finish this and try to find Vecna.

We saw Mike telling Eleven that he loves her. How has he developed between seasons? Is he more assured now?

☆ I think that he has broken out of the more self-involved way that he was, and now he's back into Mike as leader mode, like he was in the first season, where he was making plans. In some ways, he's directing the group, or at least the group of kids at the beginning, and Nancy is doing similar with the teens. The Wheelers are back and strong.

The family are involved in the crux of this season in a big way. Who do you feel he has the most interesting relationship with in this season?

☆ Mike has a lot of great moments with a lot of different characters, which is a testament to the season being great, because you can pick off all these different character dynamics that we haven't visited in a while. I mean, I really enjoyed some stuff between the Wheelers, specifically Nancy. I really, really enjoyed doing that because I felt like these are people who really, really understand each other. And to be able to work with Natalia [Dyer] in that way was really awesome.

Do you see many parallels between this season and the first?

☆ Definitely. There are tons of parallels, and I'm excited to see what things people notice, the Easter eggs and references to season one. It's a perfect continuation of Four, but it has a lot of stuff that people who watch One and like One the most will really enjoy. It's got a little bit of everything, and I think that will make the fans really happy.

It sounds like this season is bigger than any of the others.

☆ Every season gets bigger scale-wise and action-wise. And while this season is definitely heavy on action sequences, it cares about its characters a lot, and cares about those character moments. There's one scene in particular that I have this season about which I won't give anything away, but I knew I had to prepare for it.

Like, last season, we shot a scene... it wasn't even an action scene, it was just where Gaten and I had to run through the High School in the first episode. I was so out of breath and so out of shape. We got the scripts earlier than we usually do for Five, so we had more time to prepare, and I saw a scene where there's some running involved, and so I immediately texted the Duffers being like, "I'm going to start running now so that I don't puke while I film this scene." That was a really fun sequence to film, and I'm super-excited for people to see it.

Some of the runtimes of these episodes are huge. Did it feel like filming back-to-back movies?

☆ There's always a point in filming any of the *Stranger Things* seasons where it's like, "Okay, this is normal, this is just stuff we've always done, whatever." And then you walk into a set. I mean, the set builds for this season are out of control. They're the biggest and most crazy, such incredible craftsmanship went into them.

I remember Four, walking into the Russian courtyard prison where Hopper had that gladiator fight with the Demogorgons, and it was like, "Oh my god." Each year, the show just tops itself. And they are kind of like movies. There's so much lore, there's so much stuff to wrap up with the characters. But I think all the episodes move super well, none of them feel overly long, they all earn their time.

There was this funny rumour that every episode was two and a half hours long, which is just impossible, but the first few are an hour long and it definitely gets longer as the show goes on.

What was the balance of acting against practical vs greenscreen on set?

☆ What was nice this year, we actually did have a ton of practical stuff. I feel like this season is the most I've ever been on location for the show, which is awesome, because it really puts you in it, and really makes you more present as you play the character and act in these scenes. There's a lot of studio work, but I don't think I was on any bluescreen, not once, except near the end of the show. We were outdoors, still on a set, the bluescreen was more background stuff to fill in.

But I felt like, at least from my storyline – I'm not sure for other characters – there were insanely big set builds that you could walk around in. Like, there were towns. It was super-great. I'm glad it didn't feel like, "Okay, this whole season is on a Volume" [background LED screen] or whatever. It was like, "No, let's go out."

How would you describe the tone of this season?

☆ Every season I feel has its theme, but I honestly don't know what the theme of this season is yet. I know what the themes are like. I know that it's incredibly action-packed. I know that it's super, incredibly sentimental, but without beating the audience over the head with it. And I know that it's really funny and weird.

It's a very weird season when it comes to comedy, which I think is awesome, and such a cool swing. I remember the Duffers, the way they talk about each season is that they have a movie comparison. So season three was like their [*Indiana Jones And The*] *Temple Of Doom*, it was them going over the top with all the Russian stuff and the bright colours and big sets, and Four is more like *Nightmare On Elm Street*. And this one, I'm not sure what they would compare it to.

Did anything in particular surprise you about this season?

☆ Definitely. I mean, there's a particular tone that we visit within

Mike gets on his bike for one last time. Aww.

this season that's almost Coen Brothers-y. It was just a new thing, and it was so cool. It's just like, man, we're still taking swings. I mean, we could have played it a lot safer. But that's a testament to the Duffers and how they are not interested in what makes most sense to a studio or whatever. They just want to tell the story in the way that they want to tell it, and I feel like people will really enjoy that.

How would you describe where Mike ends up at the end of this season? Was his journey satisfying for you?

☆ I was definitely, definitely pleased with it. And it was something that I feel was bigger than I could have imagined. I couldn't have imagined how big that moment felt, reading the final thing, and it ended in the best way it could have, when it comes to my character. Reading that for the first time was definitely a super-emotional experience.

Does it feel like your journey with Mike and *Stranger Things* has come to an end?

☆ It never really leaves you, the relationship that I have with that character. I don't think it will ever really leave, because, in a lot of ways, Mike's got my DNA in him. We share a lot of different things, and I feel like I know him really well, so it's something that I think will continue, or that character will continue to be a big part of my life. I've been playing that character for so long and we sort of grew up together, I kind of feel a little like he's a part of my life.

Is it strange knowing you and the cast won't all be back together to film another season?

☆ You have to make an effort to see each other. It's like family; you've got to put in the effort to call your family and make sure that they're okay. It's made our relationships a lot stronger after the fact. I mean, in the same way that family, whenever you see each other, you go back to whatever dynamic you had when you were younger.

If you go back to your parents' house, you act the same, like you're 13 again. I feel like even though we are all growing as people, every time we see each other, it's like going back to how it was when we were kids. It's also comforting. It's worrying to be like, "Oh man, I hope I see everyone!" But knowing that they're just on the other side of the country, or on the other end of the phone, it's good to know.

THE RANGER

Caleb McLaughlin on Lucas seeking revenge against Vecna

In season four, Lucas tried to define himself away from just being a nerdy *Dungeons & Dragons* player, only to realise who his true friends have always been. Now, after a confrontation with Vecna, he's hoping Max will eventually wake from the coma she has been put in. "I wish we could talk freely about it, because I feel like the last season is my favourite season," Caleb McLaughlin tells *SFX*. Luckily, his tongue isn't too tightly wound...

Last season, Lucas was trying to find his own feet with a different group of friends. Where do we find him this season?

☆ Lucas was going through this crisis of identity as a teenager, which I feel like a lot of people go through in their own ways. Lucas's version was going to school and feeling that maybe he needed to do something different. He's tired of being made fun of because of who he is.

He changed his hairstyle, and then, at the beginning of season four, Max broke up with him, and he was trying to get back with her, and he felt lost. He was out being a nerd and felt like it sucked.

I don't think he was trying to be cool – I think it was more he was trying to find himself and trying something different. But I don't think he ever really left the gang, he was just trying to engage his friends. He was trying to be like, "Hey, once I'm in with the cooler guys, then we're cool."

I felt that he was trying to help his friends out. They just didn't want that, and he's like, "Fine, you guys don't want to support what I'm trying to do, then I'm going to do my own thing." But it didn't last that long. He realised he wasn't about that life.

How is Lucas affected by Max being in a coma?

☆ It affects Lucas a lot this season. In season four, when all that stuff happened to Max, he thinks it's his fault because he could have helped her. I mean, he helped her – he saved her, in a way – but I feel like he has some internal guilt that he could have stopped it, or he could have helped her more. There's a lot of trauma for him in that way. Someone that he loves and cares about, it was his task to look after her, and now she's in the situation that she's in. So that definitely affects him going into the new season.

At the end of last season, he saw Vecna firsthand. How terrified is Lucas now?

☆ I think he is more terrified than he's ever been before, because it's happened to someone who's closest to him. Not that it hasn't happened to people who were close to him before, but this is the closest it's ever been. There's definitely some vengeful thoughts, even in his heart, and he wants the revival of Max and her wellbeing. He is fearful, but also wants his revenge. But I don't think it's scaring him into a ball. I think he's good, he has an eye on getting things done.

With Vecna out in the open and with Hawkins in quarantine, it feels like the season hits the ground running.

☆ We start differently than any other season we've had. I think it's a great opening, how you get right to the action. For the viewers, it'll be refreshing and intense. A lot of people, everyone who's been waiting for the new season, they're going to really, really enjoy it.

With everything that's happening with Max, is this the most emotional season for Lucas?

☆ There's going to be a lot of emotion this season, because it's the last, and there's going to be a lot of questions that are answered because it's the last season. The characters are really going to go for any desire that they have, and they want to finish the job.

I mean, since season one, we've been trying to get rid of this Upside Down world or whatever it is, and now we know who to tackle. Our hearts are definitely scarred, and I think everyone's going into the season with a heart full of revenge. It's going to be a roller coaster.

Who do you feel he has the most interesting relationship with this season, other than Max?

☆ I think Mike and Lucas, their relationship is underrated. Everyone talks about Lucas and Max, or even my relationship with Dustin, maybe in season one, and my highlight is definitely Max and Lucas. But then Mike has Eleven, and then his sister, and his mom. I don't have to go through everyone, everybody knows!

But I feel that people don't realise that Lucas and Mike were friends first. I think it is written in that Mike and Lucas were friends first. They might be the closest friends to live near each other, right next door to one another, and they have a lot of great moments throughout this season. That's a relationship that isn't really spoken about, but it's an underrated one.

A lot has been said about the scope of this season, the huge set builds, but also how intimate it gets.

☆ This season is like a mixture of season one and season four, and it's more grounded. It's real... not that any other season wasn't. But we're adults. We're real, and everyone has grown so much. Our characters have darkened over the seasons, just because of our experience and who we are.

Like, we've grown as actors and grown as people. And I feel like the stakes are definitely high, and that anything could happen, our characters know that, and the tone of the show knows that. This next watch is not going to be like an easy season three watch, but I don't know how much more I can say on that.

What was the biggest challenge of this season?

☆ Nothing was really challenging in a bad way. It was all a good challenge. We filmed for literally a whole year, from December 2023 to December 2024. That was like, "Okay, we're having to lock in and we have to know that we're going to be there for a year and stay there these long days and long nights." Just working the long days and being consistent and being patient with this big body of work, it was challenging, but not in a bad way. I love being pushed as an actor.

You've been acting for over 10 years now. How much has your performance as Lucas changed over the years?

☆ I wanted to make sure I delivered Lucas's character. I wanted to deliver because this was the last one – this was the last moment to be seen, and for people to receive his life, and to

Mike (Caleb McLaughlin) with Max (Sadie Sink).

receive who he was in his relationships. I've taken every season seriously, but it was like, "Wow, this is the last one I get to make." So I'm dissecting every moment of the script and asking more questions. I didn't want to slack, and wanted to deliver.

Was it nerve-racking going into this, knowing it's the last season and the expectations that come with it?

☆ I think that's something that I won't fully realise until maybe, like, two or three years later, to realise that this is really done. Because we've had a few years off between seasons, because it takes forever for our show to come out, which makes sense because it's a big body of work.

But knowing that this is the last time I'll read new materials from this show is like, "Wow, that's it, the past 10 years, a decade on this project, and it's going to be done now." I still dream about being on set. Like last night, I dreamt about being on set with Charlie [Heaton, who plays Jonathan Byers]. It's really been part of my life.

It's such a colossal franchise. Do you think this is really the end for you and *Stranger Things*? Will Lucas continue on screen one day?

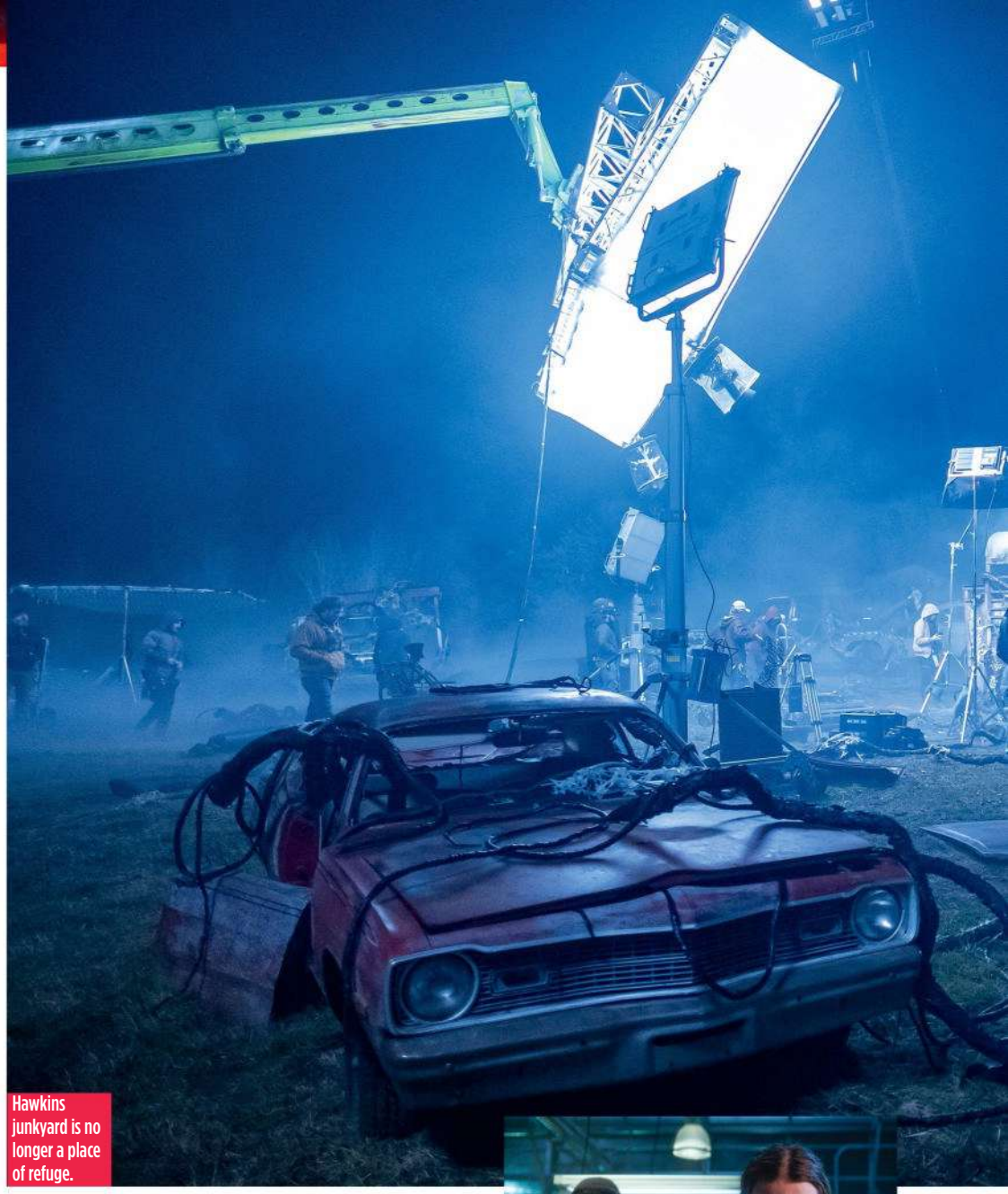
☆ I feel like, on a personal level, this is the beginning of a new friendship, a new wave, honestly, because we've been co-workers for so long, but now we can actually be friends. Even though we were already friends, but it's different when you're co-worker friends, you know? Now it's like, "Wait, I can actually hang out with this guy, or I can hang out with this girl?"

I think we have become a big family. We're siblings, brothers and sisters and aunties and uncles and grandparents. You know, Natalia [Dyer, who plays Nancy Wheeler] and Charlie are my siblings. But with playing Lucas, that's done.

It must be quite exciting to enter that new phase of your career.

☆ It's really exciting. I think ending it on this note and as a 23-year-old entering into a new phase in my life, and being able to learn and get to play different characters, that's all an exciting new phase. And even though the show ending is bittersweet, it makes sense.

All great things come to an end, and you don't want to milk the cow too much. So I think I'm really excited for the next phase and to see what everyone else does as well, because everyone on the cast is so talented.



Hawkins junkyard is no longer a place of refuge.

THE STRANGER THINGS UNIVERSE GROWS

The main Stranger Things series may be coming to an end, but the franchise will continue

"We're trying to be very careful about what else is made in the *Stranger Things* Universe, or whatever you want to call it," Matt says. "It's on a case-by-case basis, like the play [*Stranger Things: The First Shadow*] came about because Stephen Daldry, who we didn't know personally, but as a filmmaker, we've always looked up to him, and he came to Netflix and said, 'Hey, I love *Stranger Things*. I'd love to make a play out of it.' So that happened. We liked that it came from an artist's passion; it wasn't to cash in on the franchise. It's a prequel and the intention with that was, if you're a big fan of the show, you'll get something out of it, but you absolutely do not have to have seen that show to watch season five. It just enhances the experience.

"The cartoon [*Stranger Things: Tales From '85*], Ross and I just grew up watching the *Beetlejuice* cartoon and *Real Ghostbusters*, and these cartoons that were based on movies that we had loved. We thought there was something very natural about there being a cartoon of the show that would appeal to people who watched the show, but also would be able to reach a younger audience as well, who might not be permitted to watch a show. We're hooking seven-year-olds on horror because that's the kind of thing I wanted when I was younger. So get them started early, I say!"

"The cartoon goes back and fills in a six-month gap that we weren't able to explore," adds Ross. "It's fun because you get to see them as little kids again, but it's not really again."

Play *The First Shadow* opened in 2023.

STRANGER THINGS: FIRST SHADOW PHOTO BY MANUEL HARLAN

and start to roughly plan it out. But even then, things change as you make discoveries each season. So a lot of big ideas were there, but even something like Holly [Wheeler] being a centrepiece of this season, that was a discovery as we were breaking season five. So you always want to allow room for things to change and evolve and grow."

Another discovery while breaking the season (and don't worry, we'll come back to why Holly Wheeler's so important in just a minute) was how important Will Byers was to the story. In fact, season five opens with a scene that recontextualises a very important moment from season one and features a CGI de-aged Will. "We didn't always know we were going to start with the opening scene that we did," Ross says, "When we were breaking the season, those initial conversations were that Will was going to be, in a lot of ways, the heart of the season and the key to this season. It made sense, as we started talking about it, to go back in time and revisit an earlier time that we didn't see before."

Eleven flexes her nosebleed-inducing special power.

"We really wanted the show to come full circle," he adds. "A lot of this season was trying to make sure everything tied up, and that we really went back to season one and explained how those events affected everything moving forward, including this final season."

UP TO ELEVEN

Much of that first season centred on a bald, super-powered girl called Eleven, who we would later come to know (and love) as Jane. Brown's character was, it's fair to say, the show's immediate standout, quickly becoming an icon and elevating *Stranger Things*' popularity even further, all while making the

Filming Eleven from inside and outside the bus.

Shooting Karen and Holly's underwater sequence.

Linda Hamilton getting hands-on as Dr Kay.

young actor a global superstar who has since appeared in *Godzilla Vs Kong*, *Enola Holmes*, *The Electric State* and more.

"When you have an actor like Millie, it's fun to really push the character into new challenging territory, because Millie can handle it," Ross says. "She gives an incredible performance this year. In terms of what we're doing differently with her and what I think is interesting about her story this year, it's this idea of, as we're approaching the endgame, there's this lingering question of, What does life look like beyond that for her? Because, as much as she's been striving to achieve some level of normalcy, she doesn't fit in this world like everybody else, and ultimately can't because of the military and the government. So what does that mean?

"And what does love look like for her? Could she have a life with Mike if everything goes right? That's a challenge that she's going to be wrestling with. There's a lot of story with her and Hopper, a lot of sort of unresolved father-daughter issues that re-emerge. I always love Millie and David together, and they have a lot of really strong scenes this year. We haven't done that as much since season two, so it was fun to re-explore that relationship."

"I'm just so impressed with the entire cast, each one of them has a major standout scene"

Speaking of Mike, when asked which character they are most excited for audiences to see this season, Ross quickly mentions the former Dungeon Master's name. "I think Mike, for a few seasons, he hasn't been as front and centre as he was in season one. One of the goals this year was that we wanted to see Mike take over that leadership role one more time and really be a leader to this party and show them how much he's grown. So Finn has a lot of big and challenging scenes this year, and he really stepped up."

"I'm just so impressed with the entire cast, each one of them has a major standout scene, or scenes that feature the best work they've ever done," Matt adds. "It's impossible to single them out, but we were just talking about Natalia

Continued on page 46

THE CLERIC

Noah Schnapp talks de-aged Will and coming face-to-face with Vecna

In November 1983, Will Byers went missing, kick-starting a succession of events that would eventually lead to his friends and family taking on a world-ending threat from the Upside Down. In season five, Will is central to the action once more. "It was definitely nice to have been given some more opportunities in the final season," Noah Schnapp tells *SFX*. "And I'm excited to see how the audience reacts to it."

The new season kicks off with an alternate look at season one, featuring a de-aged version of Will in the Upside Down. What was that filming process like?
☆ It was weird. I will say that I had to work with a younger kid, which was actually really cool and a full circle moment for me, because it felt like, "Oh, wow, now I'm the adult telling this kid what to do, and I'm no longer that little boy being told where to stand." It just helped me reflect on all the years that passed, and he was a really sweet kid. And I got my little taste of directing, and worked with him for a few days on set to get his physicality and running and breath work the same as mine. Then they put me in a tent and had me do all these different expressions and faces, like fear, and running and all these things. It was so weird. And then the VFX team worked on it for months. I mean, there were these VFX people who told me, "Noah, I have been working with 11-year-old you for the past six months, watching every video of you." It's like, "Oh, that's weird." But then they stamped it onto that little kid, and we got this cool little flashback scene, which is fun.

This season seems to have many inflection points with season one.
☆ Definitely, there were so many moments throughout the season where I was like, "Oh, I was sitting here with this character in season two," or "I had this exact frame on this thing in season one." I mean, that library basement in the opening of season five is the same library basement from season one, where Will gets rescued. There are lots of callbacks and that was really reminiscent for me.

There's a big link between Will and the Upside Down. Is that explored more this season?
☆ They definitely get into more of the why? What? Why him? Why was he the first taken? How has this connection to the Upside Down affected him? And how has it evolved and developed as he's grown? Now that it's come back to Hawkins, he's even closer than ever to the villain.

What's it like filming scenes opposite Vecna?
☆ It's always crazy impressive how they do that mostly practically. I mean, Jamie [Campbell Bower] sits in that makeup chair for seven hours, and then has to go on set, and then has to go through the hours of removing it. I always applaud our show for its dedication to making it practical.

What was the biggest challenge of filming this season?
☆ I brought on an acting coach for this new season, just because, midway through, I was like, "Oh, this is a lot, and I need help." But I think just there were so many new moments that have no base in them, like there's a lot of supernatural stuff that hasn't been referenced before and was brand new. And I'm like, "But how do I do this?" And they're like, "Well, figure it out. Create it!" So there was a lot of trust in the actors to create these new beats and ideas and moments, which you'll see. You know, there's a lot of pressure to get it right, I guess, but it felt good.

Does it feel like this season reaches new emotional depths?
☆ We've all put our all into it, and reached crazy levels of emotion and just effort into our characters that I don't think any of us have ever given before.

What balance do you think this season finds between action and horror?
☆ They've definitely leaned more into horror. I say this every year, so I hate saying it again, but everything just feels more intense and bigger. But what's nice about this season is they do make an effort to circle back to – I can't say it's smaller because it's not, it's bigger than ever – but there are moments where they circle back to these small season one beats and relationships and ideas that feel really full circle and nostalgic, that tug at your heartstrings a little.

It takes time to go bigger on a show like this.
☆ Everyone is always like, "Why does it take so long? These kids are adults now!" But I'm like, "They're writing so much, just be patient." The amount of shit we filmed last year is insane. It literally is like eight movies. It's crazy. To look back to when I watched the first episode, I'm like, "Whoa, this is such a different person from who and where I am now." The filming process was so long, I feel like we almost evolved and grew through the season itself, which is cool to see on screen and lends itself nicely to the story, because all of our journeys are of us growing and changing. Even like little Holly [Wheeler], by the end, I'm like, "Oh my god, she grew up, but it's the same season."

It's surreal that the series has been filmed over so many years, and we, the audience, have essentially watched you grow up.
☆ The fans do feel like they grew up with us. And I think that's what makes it even more special for all the audience members, for them to connect with us, because a lot of them not only watched us grow up, but grew up with it as well. It allows them to reflect on their own childhood and growth. It's a big moment for all of us.

Which character do you feel Will has the most interesting dynamic with this season?
☆ With Robin. She's his go-to for the season, and it was really fun getting to work with Maya [Hawke], because I always had this work crush on her and wanted to do scenes with her. The funny thing about our show is our cast is so big, some of the characters I've never worked with or barely interacted with. She was one of those people I had never got to work with, so getting to be one-on-one with her for so much of the season was so fun, and our relationship in real life mirrored what it was in the show, she became a mentor for me through the year. She's great.

After Will came out as gay on the show, you came out publicly, and the Duffers have spoken about incorporating elements of actors' lives into their characters. How much of what was written for Will

Will's link to the Upside Down will become clear.

was planned, and how much was influenced by your own life?
☆ I think it was planned from the beginning. Like, in season one, they hint at it, they call him 'queer' and 'fairy' and all these bullying-ish terms, but they didn't really dive that deep into it. They touched on it through the years, and as we've gotten more recent, they've explored it more because our show is ending and they have to close up the story. I don't think it had anything to do with me, but it was a nice bonus that I had some form of relation to it.

Have you had any input on that part of his character this season?
☆ Not at all. There are such big broad strokes to these characters and themes, I would feel like I'm overstepping to tell them what to do, but in the more minor scene-to-scene moments and dialogue, they're open to anything, and so collaborative.

You've said before that you found it easier to play the character after coming out and having that as part of the character.
☆ His journey just helped me fully feel more confident in my own, I guess, and that helps me feel more confident on set.

Is it surreal to let go of the character after playing him for so many years?
☆ I've played him for so long, I'm so ready to play another character. Will Byers is my baby, I love him dearly. But is it hard for me to let go? I'd say I'm more excited to explore what's next for acting purposes, but I love him, and he's shaped me, and I've shaped him, and I'm so thankful that I've gotten to play that character for all these years.

How was that experience reading the last scripts?
☆ We were all anxious to see how it would turn out, who wouldn't be? There's so much pressure on that last episode. I didn't expect it to be as emotional as it was just reading it, so I can't even imagine what it's like to watch it. I'm not ready to watch it with the world and experience those emotions again, but I think it's important to process it, to move on.

How do you think people will feel after the last frame has rolled?
☆ So sad. So heartbroken, but also hopefully satisfied and empowered to be themselves and continue on closing a chapter of their life and be ready for the next. I don't know, it's a lot of pressure on the last episode. I just hope people like it.

THE BARD

Gaten Matarazzo on how Dustin takes Eddie's death to heart

Dustin has traditionally been the funny guy on *Stranger Things*, but not any more. After the death of Eddie, he's been shaken to his core – something that will be explored across the bumper season five. "It felt like we were filming eight movies," Gaten Matarazzo tells *SFX*. "We were in Atlanta that whole year, which was nuts, but so much fun."

Where's Dustin's headspace at the beginning of this season, especially with the gang being held in a quarantined Hawkins?

☆ I knew we were going to have to shift everything going in, considering the circumstances after season four, and I was really excited to see where the Duffers were going to take it. All of us have, throughout the process of the show, experienced our plethora of traumas and really scary situations that we've had to settle in with and live with over the years. We've seen people that we're close to die. We've seen our town ruined, to an extent, and it's bound to take a toll over time. But this one specifically felt very different, especially after Eddie died. Dustin, seeing that up close and having it happen to somebody so close to him, and not only was it somebody close to him, it happened with him, like he was the only one really there, I can imagine that would be hard to sit with and grow from, especially at 16 or 17 or however old he was, he's 17 at the start of Five. I knew that it was probably going to be centred around that, and that was a challenge going in, because usually Dustin's pretty happy-go-lucky, and a very energetic person, and we find him quite reserved and moody and disrespectful to others, considering what everybody's going for. Everybody has a right to be moody, but he's irritable and disconnected and dejected from the people he loves very, very much, and it's discouraging to the gang. It's an interesting start to what the season will bring later on. But it was definitely hard to tap into, considering I'm used to just exploding from the get-go into this ball of energy. There was a different thought process going in, but it was fun to try something new.

Dustin has taken on some of Eddie's mannerisms this season.

☆ That was really cool. There are subconscious changes, things that Dustin doesn't realise he's changed. There are ways his friends don't realise that he's changed. But there's also a whole plethora of very specific choices on his part to change certain things about himself, to try to look like Eddie, to uphold his values and what he loved about Hellfire and D&D, and about people like him and Dustin and his friends. It was the first time Dustin actually felt a part of a community that celebrated the way that he was rather than told him to try and mask it or change it, because as much as you love Steve, a lot of that early bond centred around building a new sense of confidence and changing the way that you were perceived, because that's how Steve knows how to go about feeling accepted, he's putting on a persona. Eddie was the first person to come along and say, "Fuck that. You're perfectly fine the way you are, and you'll be accepted and loved for that." It's tough to lose a person who's that influential to your confidence, and somebody you get along with so well. It's a pretty natural process for somebody that young who is grieving to try to physically embody somebody they've lost, to try to keep them around in some respect, which is, of course, unhealthy and just not a really good part of the grieving process. He doesn't seem to be going about it in a very productive way, but it's pretty accurate to how a lot of kids, I think, deal with grief. They try to keep the people they lose along with them, not just in their hearts, but on their clothes and in the music that they listen to, and in the way that they behave. That's something Dustin's struggling with.

The gang have always been outsiders, but they were outsiders together. This season, Dustin's on the outside of that group.

☆ It's by choice, though it seems like it's his desire to be let go of by that unit that was there. For some reason, a lot of people have a tendency to detach from their support systems when they need them most, and that's something he's been dealing with very clearly at the beginning of the show, and we see it in full swing. I imagine, between seasons, it was a slow burn. It wasn't, there was a service for Eddie, and all of a sudden, he walks into school dressed the way he is and acting the way he is, and as nasty as he is. He's just plain old nasty to the people who are in his life. I'm really glad we get to see it in full swing, so that for the audience, it's a really big shift.

It's funny to think that Dustin's edgy now!

☆ That's what it feels like. I don't think he was deciding, "I'm going to be edgy now." That's something that developed, and he went down this rabbit hole with this hyperfixation. We pick up on with him being a little too deep – deeper than he thought he would get, and deeper than what's healthy, and I think that's fun for people to see.

The Duffers have said this season's a mix of S1 and S4. How would you describe it?

☆ We all knew that was how it would be going into this season, because we missed a sense of season one; we missed being centred in Hawkins. We missed the aesthetic and the slow burn that was season one, because season one is very much an investigative crime drama before it gets into the more action-packed finale. But as things come to light, and more people get involved, and more gates have opened, and more parties have involved themselves in accessing the Upside Down outside of Hawkins' lab, the story's bound to get larger, and it's bound to get louder, and the stakes are rising progressively throughout the show. Five is definitely higher-stakes and has a lot of action and builds on what season four laid the foundation for – for an action-packed, massive season. But aesthetically and tonally, it feels a little bit eerie and creepy and like we don't really know what's coming next.

Were there many things that took you by surprise this season?

☆ Tons of surprises, and I know that people have been waiting for quite some time for this, and I see all the memes about us, a few things that we were already passing off as jokes early on, but are now real. Like how by the end of the series, we will be able to go out drinking afterwards. When we

Dustin's a much moodier character this season.

started season five, I'm like, "Oh yeah, we're all 21," so that's not really a joke any more. And like, "Oh, by the time this finishes, you guys will be married with kids." And Millie [Bobby Brown] is married with a kid. It's like, "Oh my god, they were right!" Things that felt like memes and jokes, they were accurate, which is nuts to us. So I know that people have been waiting for a very long time, and I think that it took this long because people are going to want to sink their teeth into a very long, hefty season, and that's what they're getting. I'm glad they're parcelling it up over the course of several release dates. I think that'll bring a sense of engagement to the show over time that we don't really see a whole lot of in the streaming era. I miss when there were weekly *Game Of Thrones* and weekly *Breaking Bad*s and engagement online and talking with friends about what's happening, and watch parties. That's what I'm most stoked for, seeing the glee of it all that we haven't seen in a while.

Did the sets feel bigger this time?
☆ Absolutely. There's a certain set piece that people will see in the first episode where they had to stack shipping crates, like the ones you see on cargo ships, on the back of trucks along a freeway, and they had them stacked all the way up like a big wall around us. The wall's not in the show itself; it was specifically there to block people from being able to see what we were doing, because we couldn't fit it inside a studio. They had to make it outside, and they wanted to keep it a secret for as long as they could. There were people looking out for drones to make sure that there weren't drones coming in to try to snap pictures. I think a few of them got dropped out of the sky, too.

How was it reading the final script, knowing it was the last *Stranger Things* script you may ever read?
☆ It was definitely hard to sit with. We started the process of filming by sitting down and reading the first four or six episodes, a good chunk of them, and we got that out of the way, and that felt really good. But reading the last few, we had separate days for episodes seven and eight, where we all read collectively in a more intimate, smaller space than we had for the previous episodes. That was one of the most memorable days on set. It was pretty far into the production process, and we read that last episode and said, "Timber!" That was a big day. A long day.

> **With this being the final season, we need to keep our focus on the core characters**

and how just what a powerhouse performance she gives this year. She's just incredible."

There are a few new faces in the mix this season, too – a risky move considering there are only eight episodes left to wrap up this entire series. They include *Terminator*'s Linda Hamilton, who follows in the footsteps of fellow '80s icons Sean Astin and Cary Elwes as a one-and-done cast member. She plays Dr Kay, a government scientist who's busily investigating the Upside Down.

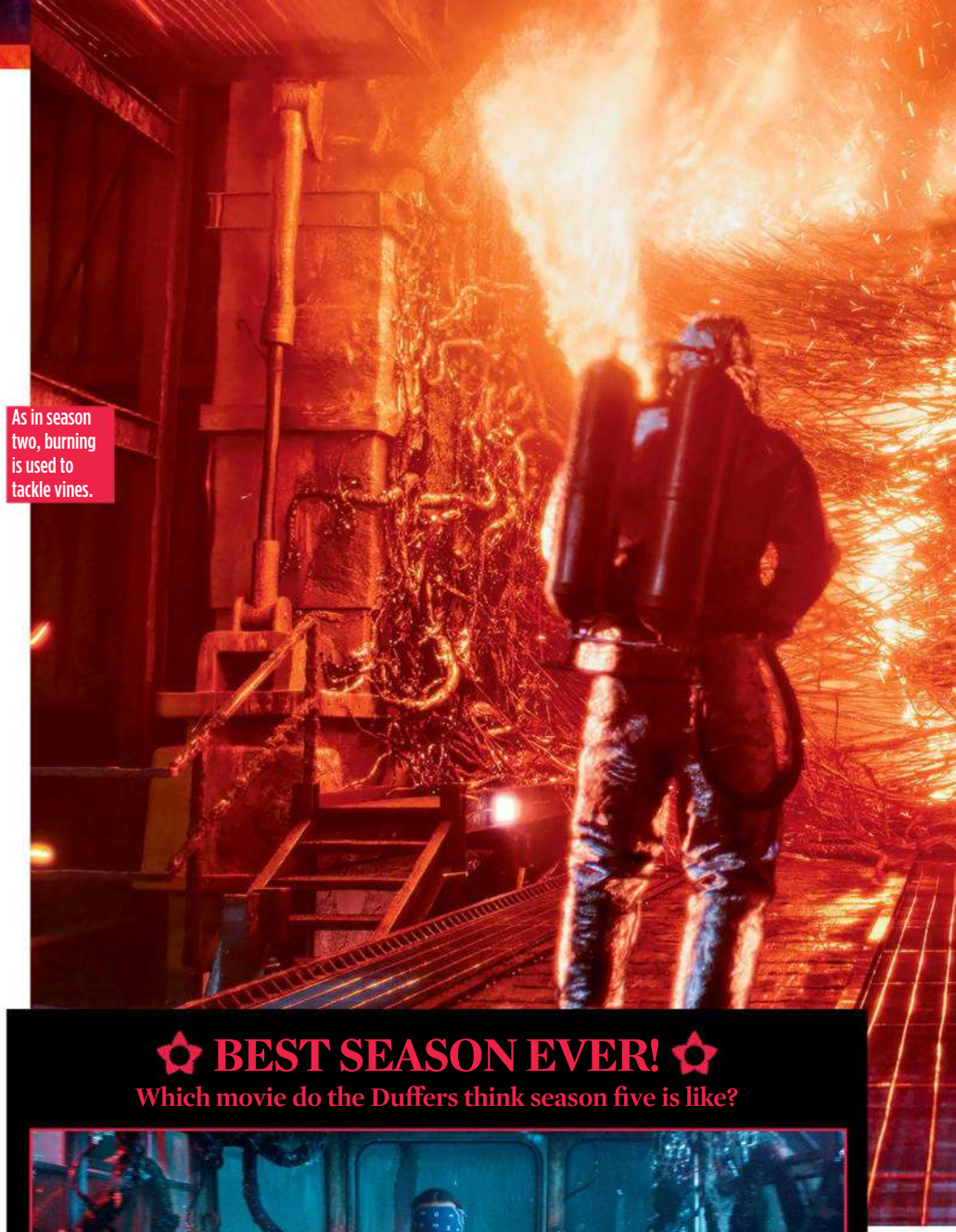
"We had so many of those discussions, with this being the final season, that we need to keep our focus on the core characters," Matt says. "But Linda is designed to replace Dr Brenner [the man who led the experiments on Eleven and One]. Matthew Modine's character is dead, so she's filling that role, and is very much a supporting character. But another important sort-of new character, sort-of not, is Holly Wheeler."

Ah, yes, Mike's sister Holly Wheeler. Nell Fisher will become the third actor to play the character, taking over from twins Anniston and Tinsley Price, who portrayed the character sporadically throughout the first four seasons. Now Holly's set to be a major player, and there's been heavy speculation online that the third episode of the season – titled "The Vanishing of [Redacted]" – might refer to Holly.

"Once you see the full season, you'll have a better understanding of why it was so important to add her to the cast," Matt says. "One of the reasons was, we just wanted to recapture some of the feeling of season one, and some of that you can't recapture unless you have kids, because our kids are not kids any more. They're not close to being kids any more. So it was really fun to add Holly and her classmates into the show, because it allowed us to recapture some of that feeling."

WORLD STAKES

Heading into season five, we know Vecna's been the one causing havoc in Hawkins and that he has ambitions to terrorise not just this town, but the entire world. "Each season we're raising the stakes, and this season the stakes are really as big as they can get," Ross says. "But what we find fascinating about it is how that really brings out all these emotions in these characters, and it forces them to confront things about themselves. We always look to the moment. Like in season four, just as an example, there was Max dealing with her dear brother Billy's death, and it's like, how can we bring in the horror, the monsters, to that? If those things can collide and climax at the same time, the emotional and the horror for the



As in season two, burning is used to tackle vines.

BEST SEASON EVER!

Which movie do the Duffers think season five is like?

Speaking to *SFX*, Finn Wolfhard said the Duffers compare each season of the show to a different movie (see p36) but he didn't know which movie they likened the new season to. So we asked them.

"We talked a lot for season four about *Nightmare On Elm Street* and *Hellraiser* for the fact that the really psychological '80s horror was our touch point," Ross says. "But for this season, we didn't have one specific touch point that's easy to point to. It was more looking at all the seasons that we had made of *Stranger Things* and asking, 'How do we bring this full circle?' A lot of it was looking back at season one and making sure that, when this all ended, it felt like one singular story, it felt like a whole. There are film touch points throughout, but it's less of a definitive this year."

"We've been making the show forever, so we have a pretty good idea of what has worked really well and what hasn't worked as well," Matt says. "So we lean into what's working well, and just try to take all the lessons we've learned to make, hopefully, the best season yet. We're really proud of the season and so that was really the goal, to take all the learnings, everything we know about the show and the characters, and make the best *Stranger Things* season ever. That was the ambition."

Frank Darabont (left) directs two episodes.

Robin (Maya Hawke) and Murray (Brett Gelman).

The makeup team create gory, as well as glam, looks.

character at its highest height, that's the sweet spot for us. A lot of the time, we're working backwards. We're going, 'Where do we want these characters to be? What do they need to talk about? What are their feelings in that moment?' We build the spectacle towards that."

"You look at all these tentpole movies, and there are so many of them, when you get to these massive visual effects sequences, I just zone out, I just completely tune it out," says Matt. "It doesn't matter how impressive the visual effects are, you just find it boring and I think the reason for that is you're not emotionally invested at the same time. Those two things have to be occurring at the same time. With all the greatest action movies, fantasy and sci-fi movies, you're experiencing the action and the really heightened emotion and feelings for these characters at the same time. Achieving one thing should not sacrifice the other thing. That's at least what we're trying to do."

Each season's length has continuously grown to almost ludicrous heights; we know that the first four episodes of the new season run the gamut between 54 minutes and one hour, 23 minutes, while the finale, set to be released separately, will run almost two hours. What's more, the scale of each season has grown considerably, and the VFX, which the brothers were putting the final touches on just before meeting with *SFX*, take months and months to get right.

Nell Fisher takes the role of Holly in season five.

Hamilton's Dr Kay is no lab-confined boffin.

"If I ever have to look at another spore visual effects shot again..." sighs Ross. "I won't miss that about the show. I won't miss evaluating spore shots, 'That spore across Mike's face, get it out of his eye.' It's endless."

"It was fun to write the Upside Down, but it wasn't fun on a production level," laughs Matt. "When you're shooting the Upside Down, you're shooting at night. We shot everything outside and the trees can't have leaves on them, so you're usually out at night and in the freezing cold. I think [director of episodes three and five] Frank Darabont got the worst of it."

It's a minor miracle that Darabont, the director of three Stephen King adaptations →

STOCK IMAGES: UMER IQBAL, ANNA BULOKH, JOSE A. BERNAT BACETE, WEAD, NATALYA BOSYAK/GETTY

BIGGEST SETS EVER!

A lot has been said of the sheer scale of the new season, and that includes the huge set builds

"One of the most exciting things is we built our first back lot for this season, which we've never had before," says Ross. "We needed downtown Hawkins to be destroyed by the rifts at the end of season four, so we couldn't just shoot in a real small town in Atlanta this season. We obviously couldn't destroy this poor small town and take it over for months. In order to build this destroyed area of downtown that the military has taken over, we had to build our stages. So that is certainly the largest set that we've ever built for the show. We have a new home base of operations for our characters, which is a radio station, which is a beautiful set. There are some epic ones in later episodes. We built some huge sets, specifically on the horror side of things.

"What was exciting is, we always want to build as much as possible, because it's so easy to throw people up against blue screen or green screen, and you can always feel it. So what our team was so excited about is, you've got sculptors and painters, and we're just building this stuff from scratch, as if this were an older film. Then, when the cast steps onto these sets, even if they're fantastical, they're immediately transported. And I think it looks more real to the audience. The actors feel like it's real because they're actually there and it just helps bring everything and to life in a much more real way."

One of the huge sets: the portal to the Upside Down.

(*The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Green Mile* and *The Mist*) and the original showrunner and developer of *The Walking Dead*, came on board the show. "I'm very excited that Frank Darabont, one of our filmmaking heroes, came on because he was retired, and somehow we enticed him out of retirement the night he directed," says Matt.

There was just one problem: Darabont hates night shoots, and the brothers were set on giving him the most Upside Down scenes of any director. "We tricked him a little bit," Ross says. "Hopefully we weren't too misleading."

"He got a little screwed," says Matt with a chuckle. "Hopefully we didn't drive him back into retirement."

Still, Darabont – an ardent *Stranger Things* fan – joined the production, and the Duffers continued to push the series to new heights. "The scale of the action and the visual effects are quite a bit bigger than any other season," says Matt. "You have that on one end, and on the other end, this is our most emotional season, because it's the end of the show. The goal of this season is to have it be both the most ambitious from a technical standpoint, but also the most emotional."

"We were, all of us, cast and the crew, wrestling with the ending of this and all the complicated feelings that it brought out. I think all those feelings come out in the performances, and they come out in the writing. It infused everything from beginning to end."

"There's something about everybody knowing that this is the last time you're ever going to do this," Ross adds. "This is the last time you're going to be speaking lines as these

Other areas of the Upside Down are smaller.

Another pivotal location: the radio station.

Atlanta, Georgia has seen a boom in filming.

The military is hunting for Eleven, who's in hiding.

“This really is the end of the story of Eleven and Mike and Lucas and Dustin and Steve”

characters, the last time we're ever going to write these characters and film these characters. There's something that happens psychologically when you know it's the last time you're ever going to do it. Everyone just put absolutely everything they had into it. Regardless of how people respond to this season, we all know that we put absolutely everything we have into it.”

There is, however, something of a question regarding whether this really is the end. We know we will see the “kids” again in the animated series *Stranger Things: Tales Of '85* (see p40), while the theatrical production *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* is ripe for adaptation. Plus, there's word that another spin-off is in the works. But any suggestion of a follow-up to the main series starring these characters is a nonstarter.

“This really is the end of the story of Eleven and Mike and Lucas and Dustin and Steve and all these characters, and Hawkins specifically,” Ross says. “You don't want to do something in 20 years where a bunch of characters are like, ‘Oh, we better get Mike back, he knew how to handle this!’ That's not what we're interested in. We do really want this to be the end of this story, this journey for these characters. We're being very careful to make sure nothing that we're doing is going to step on that.”

“I would joke with our cast that in 20 years, if our careers have really floundered, if we need a paycheque, we can always crawl back, like another rift has opened in the Upside Down,” Matt laughs. “But no, we've said everything we want to say about those characters and the Upside Down. There's not really anything else worth exploring. The book is closed, and the ending wouldn't be very impactful if we left it cracked open for some sort of sequel.”

The wait for the final season may have been long, but the end is nigh.

The first four episodes of Stranger Things season five are on Netflix from 26 November. The next three episodes arrive 25 December, followed by the finale on 31 December.

RETURN TO OZ

THANK GOODNESS, AND REJOICIFY FOR WE TRULY HAVE RETUNED TO OZ. AFTER THE PHENOMENON THAT WAS WICKED, JON M CHU LEADS US BACK ALONG THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD FOR THE FINAL TIME, COMPLETING HIS DUOLOGY THAT HAS TRULY CHANGED THE WORLD OF MOVIE MUSICALS FOR GOOD

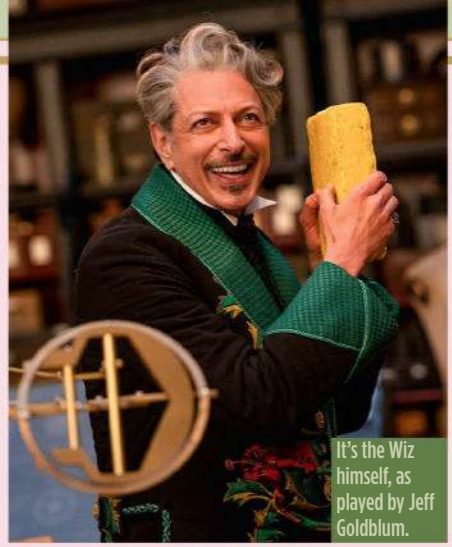
WORDS: **HENRY CALVERT**

WATCHING
YOU

LAST YEAR *WICKED* proved not only to be popular but utterly defied gravity. With the highly anticipated follow-up *Wicked: For Good* out this month, Jon M Chu is still riding high on his commercial and critical success.

"It was honestly such a relief that it was received so well – that's the dream. That the movie that you make, that you care so much about, that every frame, every colour, every shade of lighting you put so much love and effort into, that an audience has resonated with that.

"A big thing for me was all of a sudden all the calls that I got from people around the industry that I'd never gotten calls from. I've done a decent amount of movies, and I'd like to think I've made a name for myself, but when your heroes reach out, it's pretty cool. Like last week I met Dennis Muren and Andrew Stanton, and being able to talk to these people not just as idols but as industry peers and discuss storytelling and craft felt so surreal."


It's the Wiz himself, as played by Jeff Goldblum.

Glinda (Ariana Grande) has gone full-on Good Witch...

...but Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) very much hasn't.

THERE AND BACK

Before *Wicked* even hit screens it embarked on one of the most memorable press tours of recent memory, bringing with it a plethora of memes, Ozmopolitan red carpet looks, and for Chu a time he still holds plenty of space for.

"What was interesting is when we first started promoting the movie last year, we had already lived everything. We had gone through and filmed all of movie two. We had witnessed these characters' birth, their childhood. We'd seen them when they first met and we'd witnessed their separation.

"So before anyone had even seen a frame, we'd already lived the whole thing, and I think that was why it was so emotional last time. It felt like we were mourning the passing of our work, and yet we had to celebrate the beginnings of it, which I think was also very healing. But now it feels like everyone is there with us, we are all now on the same emotional wavelength and that's a wonderful feeling."

"Guards, seize her!" "Uh, it's Elphaba, actually."

Michelle Yeoh returns as Madame Morrible (left).

Fans are certainly waiting anxiously for their next visit to Oz. The first film not only proved to be a hit commercially, coming fifth at the worldwide box office last year, but also received overwhelming critical acclaim by snagging 10 Academy Award nominations – including Best Picture, and a win for Best Costume Design for the exceptional and vibrant work of Paul Tazewell. Fair to say the pressure is on for this second instalment.

"I'm really still in it, we only just finished a couple of weeks ago," Chu considers. "We were just finalising the sound mix, getting the score in, the final visual effects just rolled in and those are all nerve-racking, because you're like, gosh, I hope that that thing looks better than it did a month ago.

"But when you're working with companies like Framestore and ILM, their finest hour truly does come in those last few weeks, and when you have whole numbers purely filled with digital animals, you've really got to have a lot of faith in those artists to make it work."

Wicked: For Good follows the same story as the second act of its stage show counterpart. After Elphaba flies off, renouncing the Wizard

Which is the worst witch, and which is not?

Jon M Chu is the man behind the curtain.

Unlike the Wizard, he actually gets things done...

...because of the wonderful things he does.

“I always thought the second act of the show was the most compelling side of the story”

at the end of the first half, our second act picks up a few time turns later, in a much darker, conflict-filled Oz than the one we left.

“We find our characters 12 time turns later – it’s an Ozian measurement for which there’s no real earthly comparison – and things have changed,” he explains. “The propaganda is in full swing. Madame Morrible is now the press secretary, and she’s created this illusion of who the villain is: the Wicked Witch of the West.

“Glinda has taken her place in power and is going around Oz, spreading goodness, as she does, and she’s caught in the dream that she always wanted. Yet there’s a storm brewing, figuratively and literally. Meanwhile Elphaba is fighting for the truth, freeing the animals and exposing the wizard. Whilst she’s kicking ass all the time, it’s still very lonely. It’s hard standing up for what is right when there’s no one standing beside you.

“I always thought the second act of the show was the most compelling side of the story, because it’s the adult side,” he emphasises. “They’re no longer students. The stakes are much higher and this friendship is tested because of that. The world is between these two women. Their philosophies and how they see the world are different, and how the world moves forward is different. I always thought that this was the meat of the story. This forces us as an audience to look back at our childhood stories to see if they’re still worth believing in, or if they’re shattered completely. That’s what I always really wanted to make sure we had the time and room for.”

This evocation is only possible because of the core dynamic of Elphaba and Glinda, characters that are now performed at an Academy Award-nominee level by the remarkable talents of Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande respectively.

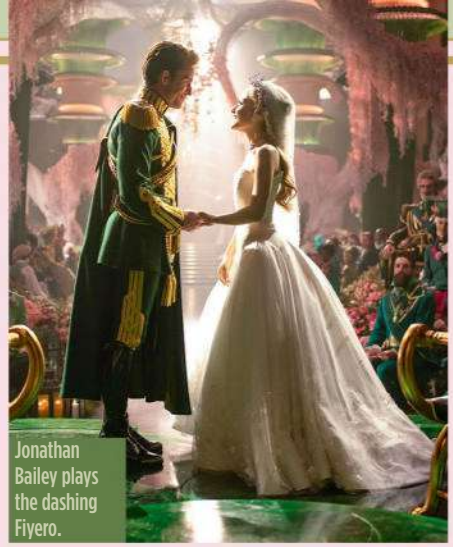
“Our way into all of this has always been the girls,” Chu says. “So making sure we allowed time to explore their emotional states, both when they’re together and also when they’re apart, was such a priority. It was amazing to watch both of the girls at work. Ari has never led a movie, so this was a huge undertaking, but I was so impressed to see her tackle it like a pro. Seeing both of them learning from each other and holding their energies was so special.

“They were living these characters, so the extent of my guidance came in the form of very specific technical elements, but when it came to character they had that covered,” he explains. “They were partners in this 800% and reinforcing that dynamic was really our priority. That’s why I think musicals are one of the greatest forms of cinema, because you don’t necessarily have to go bigger, but you get to go deeper with each character, you get to hear their internal struggle and witness it and feel it with them.”

While audiences get to experience and feel this emotional journey with these characters in consecutive order, things ran a little differently behind the scenes, explains Chu.

“Interestingly we didn’t just shoot back to back, we shot it concurrently. So one day we were in Shiz, the next day we’re burning an effigy, the next day they’re singing ‘For Good’. It was really a matter of logistics, because we had to build giant sets, and those took time and of course the weather in London determines a lot of what you can and can’t film.

“So we had to have a very clear picture of what we were trying to do and what our story was, not only mapping the plot but also the emotional map. Before we even shot one frame of it we had big boards in my office, mapping where each character was, and we made little pick points →


Jonathan Bailey plays the dashing Fiyero.

But can he really be trusted? Probably.

> **“I know when the yellow of the Yellow Brick Road is just a little bit off”**

for each of the characters: this is where their first real question of this world occurs, this is where their brain breaks, this is where they start to know the truth. When we began tracking that, it gave us a stronger image of the films’ architecture.

“I think it really shows the amount of technical skill that our actors, crew, costumes, cinematography, production design, VFX all had,” Chu considers. “We all had to be aligned because we were shooting for over a year and a half, we had 20-something musical numbers that we had to choreograph, block, rehearse, all with their own distinct camerawork and set and costume, so it was a huge undertaking.”

GOING FOR A SONG

Alongside new and exciting locations unique to the film – such as Elphaba’s forest sanctuary, courtesy of production designer Nathan Crowley – we also have two new additions to the soundtrack from composer Stephen Schwartz. That’s one original song for each of our lead witches.

“These new songs, ‘Girl In The Bubble’ and ‘No Place Like Home’ came from a place of, ‘How can we add to this story and what does this story need?’” Chu explains. “Even bringing Ariana and Cynthia on board shifted what we thought this story needed, their presence and approach presented new opportunities for expansion of character.

Madame Morrible’s propaganda machine.

“In those moments we knew it would either be a scene or a song, and when you’re working with someone as talented as Stephen Schwartz we knew it had to be a song, and he knew instantly how to approach it. It’s the advantage you have working with a legend like him.

“Within 48 hours, I already had a voice memo of him playing the piano and singing it, which is always fun to get. I’ve had that with Lin-Manuel Miranda, I’ve had that with Pasek and Paul, and getting to have that first taste from these incredible composers is always such a privilege.

“Especially when you’re collaborating with someone who understands your characters and story as well as Stephen does. He’s a story guy, it’s all about the story and how you’re structuring it with him. He’s not just giving you a song that fills a moment, he’s always asking, ‘Where are you coming from and where are we going?’

They really are a fairy tale couple. No, REALLY.

“For Glinda we knew we needed a moment where she made the brave decision to pop her own bubble, which, from her place of privilege, she does not have to do. It’s a huge moment for her character, so he wrote the song, and the moment I heard it I knew it was telling me exactly what I wanted to know.

“‘No Place Like Home’ came from a similar place, but we also wanted to link this back to the original L Frank Baum book. These are words that have resonated for over a century now, and I think those words have such a compelling context both for our story but also for the world we live in now.

“It raises questions of who we rely on to help reconstruct our home, who we allow into our home, who are we when we have the freedom to leave our home, and who are we when the leaders of our home are different to how we expected.”

He pauses for a moment. “It’s a testament to the timelessness and timeliness of L Frank

“I feel like I could just... burst into song!”

Oz the Great and Terrible? Seems a bit harsh.

"Er... it was like this when I got here. Honest."

Call someone bad enough, and they'll turn bad.

Baum that his messages and themes are just as poignant now as they were back then, and it's an honour to be continuing that legacy."

For Chu, the words "No place like home" evoke many questions. But the main image many conjure up when hearing this iconic line is one of a young Judy Garland in a blue and white dress accompanied by a cowardly Lion, a heartless Tin Man, a brainless Scarecrow and, of course, her trusty pup Toto.

The Technicolor cornerstone of Hollywood that is Victor Fleming's *The Wizard Of Oz* runs alongside *Wicked: For Good*, providing run-ins and tie-ins with all these iconic characters. Chu explains how he approached involving this facet of the story.

"I'm such a believer in *The Wizard Of Oz*," he says. "I grew up with it. I know these elements inside and out; I know when the yellow of the Yellow Brick Road is just a little bit off. I feel like I have the instincts of understanding it on the level of a fan and also someone who's been greatly affected by it, and actually went into the business of storytelling because of it.

"I'm also a day one fan of *Wicked* because I saw it before it was ever on Broadway. I saw a very clean version, so in my head I had no preconceived ideas of it. I remember where it connects. I remember sitting in that theatre and thinking, 'We're back in Oz. She's there in the bubble; it's not the exact same Glinda I know, but I recognise her and this feels very natural.' It was maintaining those core tenets of the original. Holding onto the feeling I had when I first saw that red smoke and that yellow road.

"We of course changed certain elements because that crew with Dorothy now has much more backstory and has to fit into the world of *Wicked*," he elaborates. "Tin Man and Scarecrow were really difficult. It's a combination of many disciplines, costumes, hair and make-up, and also digital effects.

"That whole process started with what do we want to see through the actor, and the number one thing we wanted to keep was the idea that these are not caricatures. You need to recognise the characters you've come to know beneath it, you have to recognise those eyes.

"It's so close to turning into a horror movie as we see the Scarecrow and Tin Man transformation. It was such a long process, of comparing density of burlap sack, how scratched it should be, whether to give him a hat, and with the Tin Man experimenting with how to incorporate what was around him before he transformed, making the tray his shoulder pads, the teacups his ears. It was amazing seeing it all come together."

The time has nearly come to head off to see the wizard take his final bow, and while Chu's days in Oz may have come to an end, he shows no signs of slowing down in his stage-to-screen musical adaptations.

"I've been working on *Joseph And The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* with Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber and Sir Tim Rice," he smiles. "That's really been a dream. I don't know if that's next. I do have my animated movie *Oh The Places You'll Go*, based on the Dr Seuss book. Pasek and Paul are writing the music for that, and it is fantastic.

"I feel very lucky, I get to work with the musical theatre gods, and I get to nerd out every day about it! I've always wanted to make people who watch my films feel like the same way I felt when I first saw those shows on stage. When you're young and musical theatre comes into your life it draws you into a world that paints this giant universe, and you feel so deeply emotions that you've never felt before: love, fear, hate, courage.

"These are the mythology of my youth, and now I get to present this mythology to others of a new generation."

Wicked: For Good is in cinemas from 21 November.

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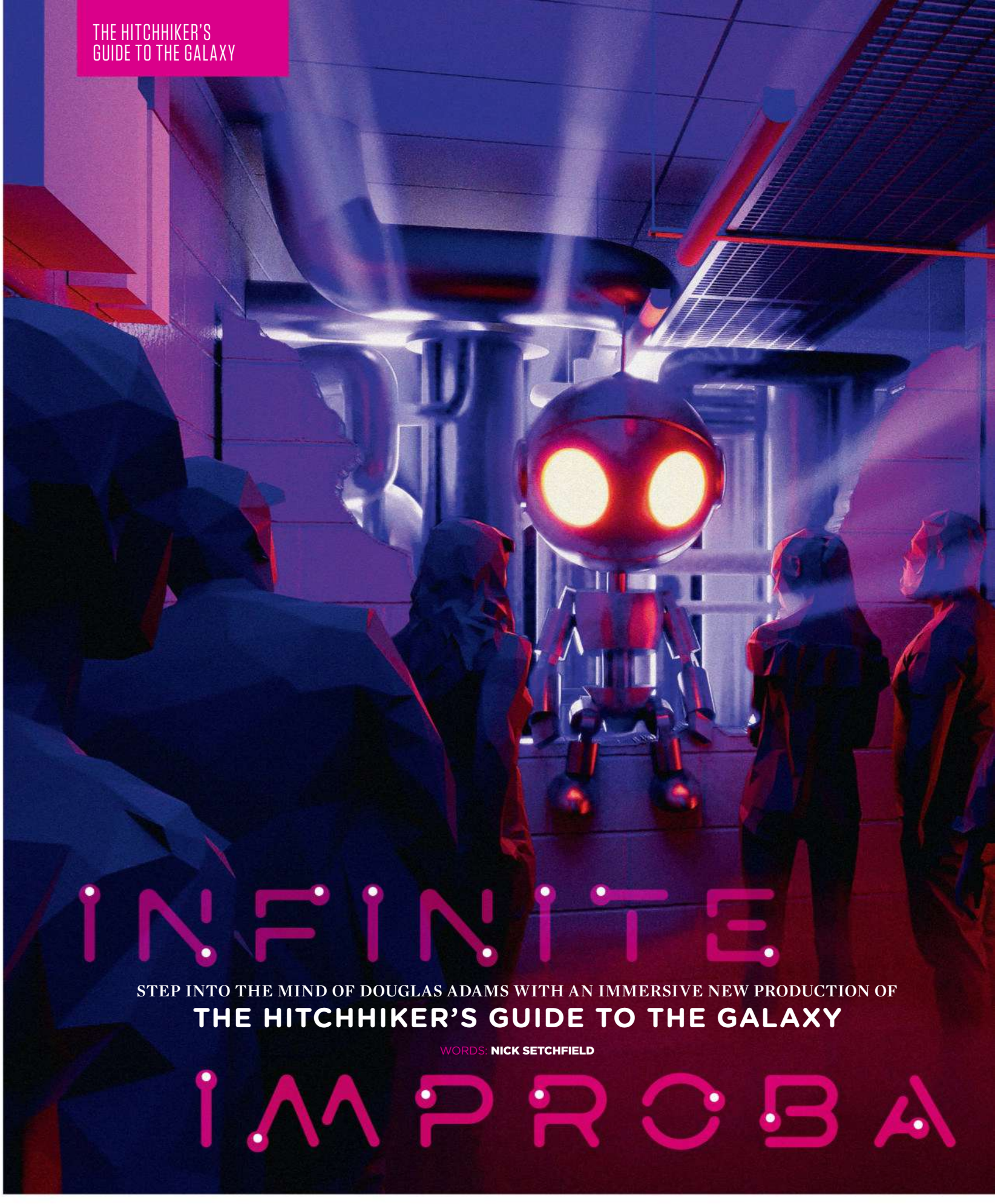
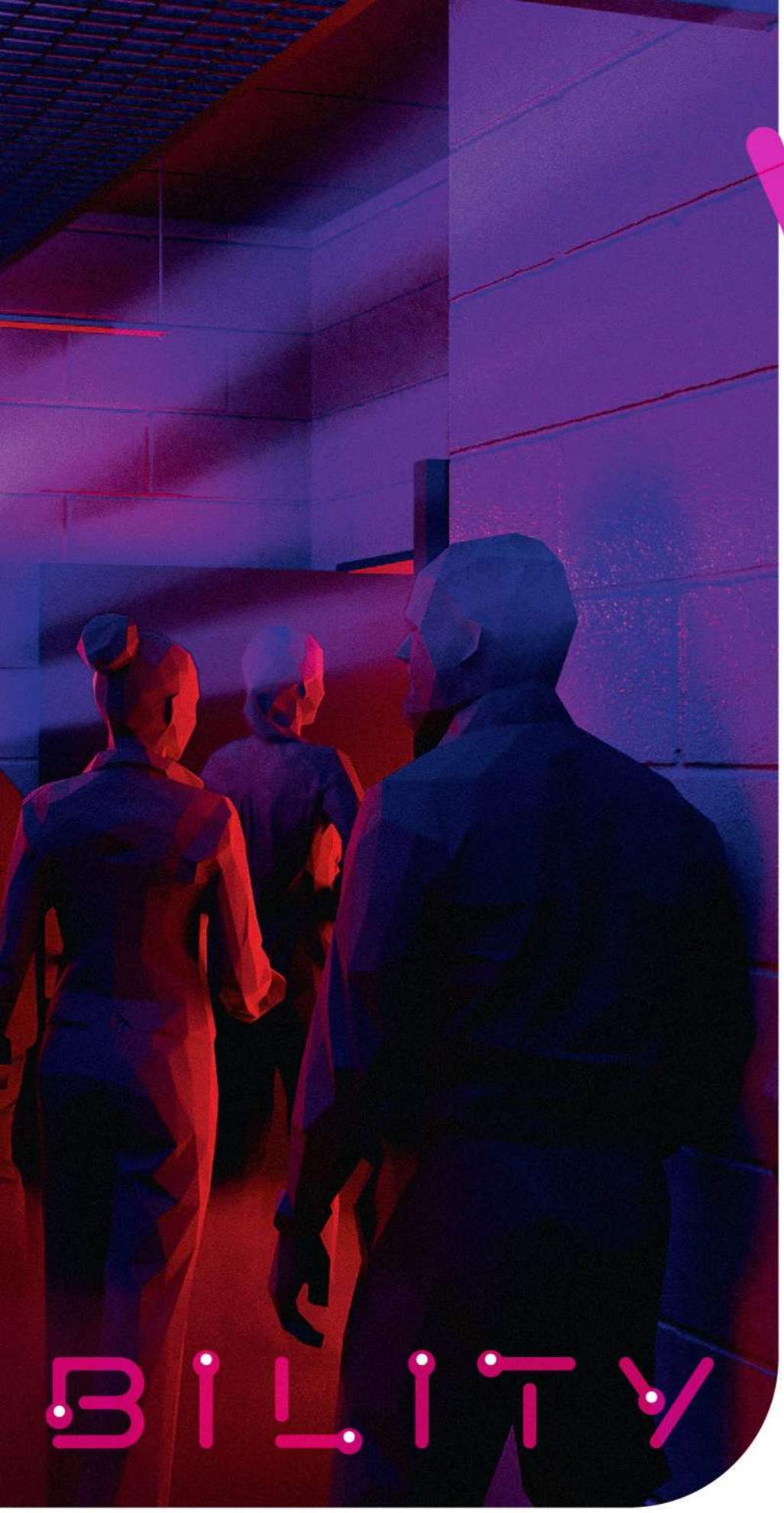


STEP INTO THE MIND OF DOUGLAS ADAMS WITH AN IMMERSIVE NEW PRODUCTION OF

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



"WE'RE NOT JUST A GREATEST HITS recitation," says Arvind Ethan David, the writer, producer and general hoopy frood behind an ambitious new stage version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. "We are, in the best sense, a tribute band – in the sense that Oasis is a tribute band to the Beatles!"

Some might say that the genius of Douglas Adams will live forever. Originally a 1978 BBC radio serial before it became a ferociously quotable franchise of novels, LPs and commemorative towels, alongside a videogame and live-action adaptations, both big-screen and small, *Hitchhiker's* can be safely filed under "phenomenon".

Adams's absurdist cosmic fable has been brought to the stage before – madcap Ken Campbell directed the first theatrical take at the ICA in May 1979 – but never quite like this, promises David. Opening this November at London's Riverside Studios, the production draws on the traditions of immersive and musical theatre, dance and magic to put the audience alongside Arthur Dent and his legendary jim-jams as he takes that life-changing hyperspatial detour. Yes, you too will struggle to get the hang of Thursdays.

A WHALE OF A TIME

"*Hitchhiker's* is famously unadaptable," says David, who produced a Tony-nominated Broadway musical based on Alanis Morissette's album Jagged Little Pill. "Whenever you try and make it into a medium that demands a linear narrative, like a film or traditional play, it doesn't work that well. I was finally at a point in my own capability as a writer and as a creative where I could say, 'Okay, I'm ready for the white whale', which is *Hitchhiker's*.

"We had a medium that was right for it, which is immersive theatre. Because what *Hitchhiker's* is about is an attitude, a tone, a set of extraordinary characters and a set of extraordinary ideas. In an open-form space, like immersive theatre, which is not fully constrained by the need for a three-act structure, you can do some of that. The challenge is doing it and still giving a satisfying emotional arc to everyone's experience. That's the challenge we've set ourselves."

As David explains, the show riffs on Adams's original narrative, keeping essential beats and set pieces while allowing the audience a chance to explore the cracks in the story.

"You are Arthur Dent, and that is the emotional conceit for our audience. Not that they're literally him, but they're coming along →

Careful Zaphod, you might spill your Pan Galactic Gargleblaster.

with him on an adventure. In the books, Arthur has no idea what is happening to him or why for a long time. It takes him about a book and a half to figure out what the hell is going on. And it doesn't really matter in what sequence things happen to Arthur. If he meets the Vogons first and Zaphod second, or Zaphod first and the Vogons second, he wouldn't be any less confused.

"What's important is that at each stage in his journey, the big questions are posed. What does it mean to have your planet destroyed? What does it mean to be the only human left alive? What does it mean to look for meaning in an empty universe? We have moments in our show where you are very much on the guard rails of the narrative, and they are set pieces that are important to experience, and then there are moments where you are free to wander around Magrathea and try and find Slartibartfast, or be lucky enough that Eccentrica Gallumbits will take you into her tantric temple, or you can go to church with Humma Kavula..."

When *SFX* speaks to David, it's at the end of a week of auditions, seeking out performers who can channel Adams's offbeat, lightning-witted spirit. "We've got some very gifted improvisers and immersive actors, as well as some more conventional musical theatre people. And between the two, people who have worked in cabaret and burlesque, people who have worked in stand-up, people who have been on television. You put those people together and something magical is beginning to happen."

It's not so much an adaptation as an interpolation, David tells *SFX*, resisting the notion that Adams's original words are something to be chanted by the faithful. "The thing you find with Adams is that if you try to straight adapt him, you will disappoint, because it's *him*. Even when he was adapting himself, he seldom just replicated a scene. He would take the scene and reconfigure it for the new medium. We've asked what are the most important ideas, what are the things he cared about the most, thematically, and who are the most important characters, the iconic moments? You have to have the Heart of Gold, you have to have Zaphod and his two heads.

"But what we didn't want was to be a predictable greatest hits, where the fans would come in and recite along with the Guide. It's wonderful that happens at screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, but we can't have it happening from day one. Of course, we'll get the hardcore fans who'll look for their favourite bits, and that's fine, we welcome them. But it had to offer something new to the fans, and it had to offer something comprehensible and that channelled the spirit of the original, but was correct for today's audience.

"There are sections that are holy writ. There are sections where you do the line in the rhythm it was written, and you hit the cadence and you hold your head in the right position when you say it. But the point of Douglas is not to recite the stuff by rote; it's to understand the ideas that animate it. One of Douglas's great heroes as a comic writer was PG Wodehouse, and he said, 'We Wodehousians are very fond of picking out our favourite lines and quoting them to one another. But when we do, it's a bit like displaying a stuffed fish above the mantel. The thing loses its beauty and its purpose when you do so.' I think that's the danger of just reciting this stuff."

SHE IS RETURNING

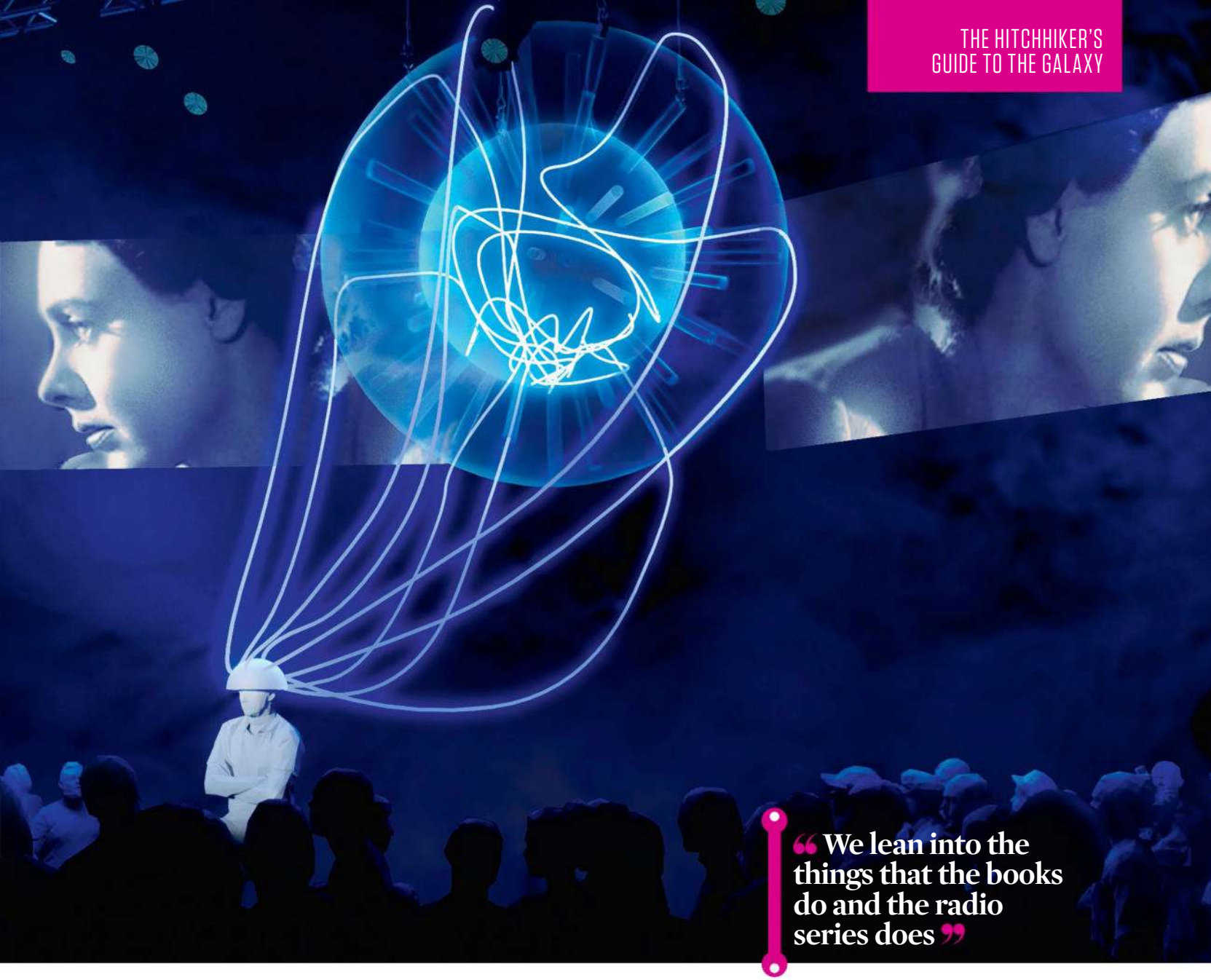
David is unafraid to tweak the *Hitchhiker's* saga in more significant ways. "Douglas always used to say that he was kind of sad about how he ended the series. He was having a very bad year when he was writing *Mostly Harmless*. He always wanted to come back to it and write a better ending – better in the sense of more positive, more uplifting. So what I've tried to do is imagine what he might have done if he was doing that. We still start at the start, but maybe we end a little differently."

That may be a relief to a character called Fenchurch. "She's the girl in the café in Rickmansworth, and she is the holder of the Ultimate Question. She's in the first book, then becomes the love story in the third book and then disappears in the fourth book. I think it was pretty shitty that he dematerialised Fenchurch! You create this extraordinary character, make her Arthur Dent's soulmate, and then you just disappear her? I felt that Fenchurch deserved better, so we're bringing her back. She's a big part of the story. Whether it's purely a love story or there's something more cosmic to it I'll leave for you to discover!"

The show's co-creator and stage designer is the Emmy Award-winning Jason Ardizzone-

Whatever you're expecting, this likely won't be it.

PICTURES © DOUGLAS ADAMS AND MOSTLY HARMLESS HOLDINGS LTD. CROWD PORTRAIT BY ANDREW TIMMS. STOCK IMAGES: MAROOSHKA/GETTY



> "We lean into the things that the books do and the radio series does"

West, whose credits include Lady Gaga's *The Mayhem Ball* and *Jesus Christ Superstar Live* with Cynthia Erivo.

"One of the things that Arthur learns most forcibly is that the world was very much not built for humans, despite what we think. So Jason's bringing that into the design, where we see the joints of the worlds, we see things being built in progress, we see backstage and behind things. You might have a beautiful bar on one side and then you walk around it and there's just a black wall. We're not trying to compete with Disney. We're not a $50 million theme ride. We're a theatre experience, and so we have to lean into the things that the books do and the radio series does, which is to say, 'Here's the idea. Now let your imagination finish it.'"

42 Arthur Dents promote the show in Trafalgar Square.

Adams isn't simply an inspiration, but an ongoing thread in David's life and career. The pair met when David adapted Adams's *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* for the stage as a student (he would later executive-produce BBC America's TV adaptation). He would come to consider the writer something of a mentor.

"Whether he thought he was actually doing it, I have no idea. But when a planet takes a minor comet into orbit around it, the planet doesn't notice, but the comet does! I certainly wouldn't call him a friend, but he was a huge figure in my life.

"What Douglas does is a sort of telepathy. When you read Douglas Adams, you feel like he is whispering directly into your brain, and is programming you to look at the world from a new perspective, because he was a genius who saw everything differently. So you crook your head to one side and try to find a different perspective.

"There's a great description in *Hitchhiker's* where Ford is squinting his eyes and hopping up and down. Arthur goes, 'What are you doing?' and Ford says, 'I'm trying to see it! It has a deflector shield on so you can't see it if you look straight at it!' You have to surprise yourself. And that is how Douglas saw the world. So as a slightly lonely, awkward, too clever, too smug, too into himself teenager, you felt like you'd met your perfect version in Douglas and you were told it's okay. It's going to work out. You're going to grow up and life is going to be glorious and weird."

It's increasingly obvious that Adams was a prophet as well as a wit, every bit on the ball as off the wall. *Hitchhiker's* alone anticipates everything from Wikipedia to iPads to the globally corrosive influences of misinformation and unchecked capitalism. What would he have made of 2025, a year he never lived to see?

"I think he might say, 'Maybe it's time to start panicking!'"

For more information go to hitchhikerslive.com.

FUTU T

IN A DYSTOPIAN NEAR-FUTURE, THE RUNNING MAN SEES GAME SHOW CONTESTANTS PURSUED AND KILLED AS THEY CHASE A LIFE-CHANGING JACKPOT. *SFX* HUNTS DOWN DIRECTOR EDGAR WRIGHT AND STAR GLEN POWELL TO DISCUSS HOW TODAY'S WORLD HAS CAUGHT UP WITH STEPHEN KING'S '80S NOVEL

WORDS: **JAMIE GRAHAM**

Richards will give them a run for their money.

REALITY TV. Cruelty and bloodlust packaged as entertainment. A huge division in wealth and a broken system. Fake news. Megacorporations taking over the running of America. When Stephen King published *The Running Man*, one of the novels he released under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman, in 1982, his 2025-set story laid out a future that seemed as fanciful as it was gritty. In it, the titular game show pits desperate contestants against a pack of trained Hunters, with all of America the arena. The longer the fleeing contestants avoid capture, the bigger the prize money, and survival for 30 days means going home with a billion dollars. The snag? To be caught is to be killed, and how to avoid such a fate when not just the Hunters, but every citizen can take part, with cash prizes offered for information on the runners' whereabouts.

Now, as Edgar Wright's adrenalised adaptation charges onto cinema screens, King's radical vision of a totalitarian, dystopian America looks bang on the money. "I feel like Stephen King has been Nostradamus a couple of times," chuckles Wright in mid-September. The director of *Shaun Of The Dead*, *Hot Fuzz*, *Baby Driver* and *Last Night In Soho* is in good spirits, buoyed by his film playing gangbusters to a test audience the night before. "It's kind of crazy that the book is set in 2025. We don't say in the movie what year it's set in; we always said [among ourselves] it's a different tomorrow."

"That's the best part about sci-fi," muses star Glen Powell, his baseball cap turned back to front. In the movie, Powell plays reluctant hero Ben Richards, a blue-collar, out-of-work construction worker who signs up to The Running Man in an effort to raise money for the medication that his sick daughter so desperately needs. "It can encapsulate what is familiar and deliver it to you in a fun, entertaining way. A lot of what we explore in this movie should feel very, very familiar."

Wright nods, though he's reluctant to be drawn on the film's politics. "I mean..." he starts, and then takes stock. "We had a test screening last night, and what's maybe sobering about it is people take it completely at face value. There's an element about it that the satire is very blunt-force trauma. It's, like, matter-of-fact about how brutal this show is, and how life is cheap. I think everybody saw it as something that felt incredibly timely." He laughs, perhaps a little nervously. "I think the movie speaks for itself. I hope I don't need to say any more about it than what's in the movie."

But perhaps we're getting too serious, too soon. Let's not forget that *The Running Man* is, for all of its subtext and substance, a large-scale action thriller that's full of wild chases, kinetic collisions and jaw-plummeting stunts. "It's gritty and it's emotional, but all in this bright, vibrant world that is relentlessly

Colman Domingo's charismatic TV host.

fun," grins Powell, while screenwriter Michael Bacall (Wright's *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, *21 Jump Street*) perhaps puts it best when asked how he managed to balance serious themes with Friday-night entertainment: "Explosions."

SHOOT TO KILL?

Rewind. It's 2am in early March 2025, and *SFX* is on set of *The Running Man* in Bulgaria. The movie is on day 78 of a shoot that has already taken in London and Glasgow, and tonight's scene features Ben Richards sneaking out late at night to post a video clip to the all-powerful Network that produces The Running Man game show. Sending daily vlogs, analogue-style, via a postbox, is a condition of the show, and perhaps explains why the Hunters always manage to find contestants wherever they might be, and soon descend in numbers, led by Evan McCone (Lee Pace).

For this scene, Wright's long-time production designer Marcus Rowland has dressed an existing studio-built street set, turning the line of brick buildings into a diner, a pizza parlour, an auto parts shop, a grocery store, a Western Maine National Bank and – in-joke alert – Derry City Hall. This is downtown Co-Op, a smog-choked shithole where Ben Richards and many equally downtrodden citizens live out their hardscrabble lives while the wealthy inhabit gleaming structures soaring into the bright, clean air. Co-Op is also the home of the Network, which uses its entertainment superstructure to spread propaganda.

Dan Killian (Josh Brolin), the in-movie TV producer.

Hmm, that guy on the bank note looks kinda familiar.

Lee Pace plays Evan McCone, head of the Hunters.

On the dilapidated high street, it's an especially grubby Chinese restaurant that is of most interest, fronted as it is by a lit-up postbox. The first assistant director calls "Action!" and Powell's Richards, disguised as a blind priest, taps his way into the frame, intent on slyly dropping off his clip while nobody is around to notice. Visual effects will later see to it that the top portion of the postbox lifts off and flies away, drone-like, with the package – this future is a heady jumble of new and old technology.

Richards halts when his cane hits the postbox, and then a voice breaks the silence. "You're just in time, Father. Best takeout in Maine." It comes from a guy in a cap who's been stood behind a robotic street-cleaning machine, tinkering at repairs.

Richards tenses, looking rather like Claude Rains's Invisible Man in a wide-brimmed hat, oversized sunglasses and a long coat. Is the guy addressing him just making innocent conversation, or has he rumbled the disguise, in which case death is in the post. The man then continues to speak: "Hey, can I ask you something? I had this girlfriend. Am I going to hell for using rubbers?" →

Wright with leading (and running) man Glen Powell.

Wright worked with Michael Cera before on *Scott Pilgrim*.

The reply comes in a broad Irish accent: "You may well go for not using them," says Richards, not missing a beat. "I have 10 brothers and sisters. My father said he was in hell every single day."

Wright and DoP Chung-hoon Chung are capturing the scene with a camera on a crane, panning along the ground as the cane taps tentatively forward and then up Powell's body to his clenched face. Wright, as always, has storyboarded the entire movie, but does take after take of this strained interaction until he feels that the timing is precisely right. He's wanted to make *The Running Man* for a very long time, and he will not rest until every millisecond of every frame is all he ever dreamed it could be.

BY THE BOOK

It was the '80s when a teenage Wright first read *The Running Man* as part of *The Bachman Books*, a compendium that was published in 1985. Wright devoured the book before he viewed Paul Michael Glaser's 1987 screen adaptation, which, as any Stephen King fan will tell you, is a fun but flagrantly loose interpretation, and not just because it stars Arnold Schwarzenegger as everyman Ben Richards. It also limits the game to one vast arena, turns the Hunters, who often pass unnoticed in the book, into gaudy villains more suited to a Joel Schumacher *Batman* movie and replaces the shockingly pessimistic denouement with a triumphant Hollywood ending.

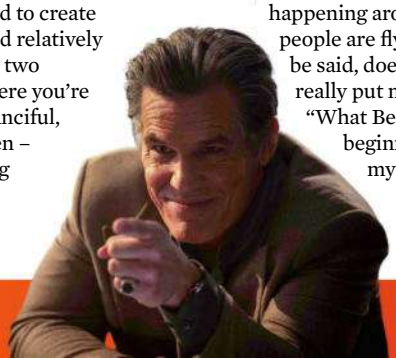
Fast-forward to around the time of *Hot Fuzz*, and Wright started looking into making *The Running Man*, knowing there was a far more faithful – and interesting – version to be made. But the rights were tied up. So when Simon Kinberg emailed him out of the blue asking if he had any interest in making *The Running Man*, he immediately jumped at the chance, teaming up with screenwriter Michael Bacall to capture the spirit of the original novel. Which would mean taking the production on the road.

"That was something in the book that was very vivid to me," says Wright, stressing how Richards escapes Co-Op City to move through other cities and swathes of countryside as he legs it along the East Coast of America. "It was really wild making the movie because we were always on the move. There's something like 170 locations and sets. When I watched it last night with an audience, the range of locations and the amount he travels in it, I'm proud of. It hopefully looks like a very lived-in and vivid world."

The action starts at the Network's studio in Co-Op City, as Richards meets The Running Man's slippery producer Dan Killian (Josh Brolin) and gets to share a stage with the larger-than-life, Jerry Springer-alike host Bobby Thompson (Colman Domingo). Then the game is on, with Richards literally running for his life. Again and again the noose tightens as the Hunters close in, and again and again our hero manages to burst free by the seat of his pants.

"This has as much suspense as action, because you're in a movie where your lead character is trying not to attract attention," says Wright. "It isn't a film where he's running into a crowd and beating everybody up. That would be ill-advised. But it does feel intense because you're with him the entire way and you're experiencing the developments of the story as he is. We don't cut back to the studio audience or the baddies. We stay with Ben, we only see what he sees. We tried to create situations that seemed relatively grounded. We've had two decades of action where you're used to seeing very fanciful, stylised stuff on screen – just the ongoing Hong Kong influence in Hollywood, from *Kill Bill* to *John Wick* to films I've made. Because of who Ben Richards is, this was an opportunity to bring it down to a more relatable level."

"The references we've talked about on this movie are everything from *Die Hard* to *Escape From New York*," says Powell when he chats to *SFX* in his trailer after shooting the blind priest scene. "It's ordinary people against extraordinary odds. I've always loved movies with people like Kevin Costner, Kurt Russell and Harrison Ford." He pauses to pet his dog Brisket, a terrier-poodle mix. "It's been a real blast because the stuff we're doing on this movie isn't random wirework and relying on visual effects. It's all in-camera. It's all happening around you. The explosions are real, people are flying past you..." Powell, it should be said, does most of his own stunts. "I've really put my body on the line," he grimaces. "What Ben Richards goes through from the beginning to the end... I'm just getting my shit rocked the whole movie."



PHOTOGRAPHY: ROSS FERGUSON/PARAMOUNT. STOCK ART: SHOAIB RASHEED/GETTY.

Chasing ratings while people are being chased.

FIGHTING SPIRIT

For Wright, Powell was the perfect actor at the perfect time – a physically capable, charismatic star who nonetheless has that everyman quality. The easy-going Texan has the clout to head up an event movie, given his rapid ascent over the last three years with *Top Gun: Maverick*, *Hit Man* and *Twisters*, while his natural magnetism makes it all the more believable that the public starts to root for Ben as he survives deeper and deeper into the game. He becomes an emblem, his defiance threatening to spark a revolution among viewers.

Wright describes Richards as a guy who can't stomach bullies or hypocrisy, pointing out that his righteous moral code has got him blacklisted by the Network before the movie even begins – hence his unemployment and inability to afford medicine for his daughter. Bacall, meanwhile, refers to "an anger that drips off the page", meaning we get to see Powell trade in his normally smart-mouthed persona for something more terse.

"Edgar calls it 'bad-mood Glen'," laughs Powell. "I'd say, as a person, I'm very patient, but to play Ben is a blast. He's got a very short fuse." And for good reason. "There's not a huge middle class," the actor explains. "The classes have become very separate – it's the haves and the have-nots. I feel like that really highlights this nature of not being able to find your way in the world, no matter how hard you work. There's a frustration in that class of people that I think people can identify with. Rage and frustration are universal notions, and very prevalent today."

"Ben is a reluctant revolutionary," says Wright. "I don't think he's somebody who necessarily wants that responsibility at first, and doesn't see that he has that power and that soapbox. It's not something he takes to easily. He's just trying to get through the game, get back to his family, so the fact he's sparking a revolution isn't of interest to him."

Powell must adapt to survive a 30-day hunt.

There's plenty of high-paced action and thrills.

Ben Richards becomes a reluctant revolutionary.

Which brings us to *that* ending. As we mentioned earlier, the Schwarzenegger film opted for something palatable and victorious. Wright's film will steer closer to the novel. But, let's face it, King's cataclysmic conclusion of having Ben pilot a hijacked plane into the Network's skyscraper just isn't feasible after the terrible events of 11 September 2001. So how to solve that particular riddle?

Wright takes a breath. "There are obviously some elements [of the book] that are not going to be a part of the new adaptation," he says. "Even Stephen King... he had to give script approval, and probably one of the most nerve-wracking parts of the production was sending the email to him with the screenplay attached. He loved the adaptation and said he'd been curious as to how we were going to tackle the ending. I'd say it's not that ending, but it has the spirit of that ending. We allude to it, in a way."

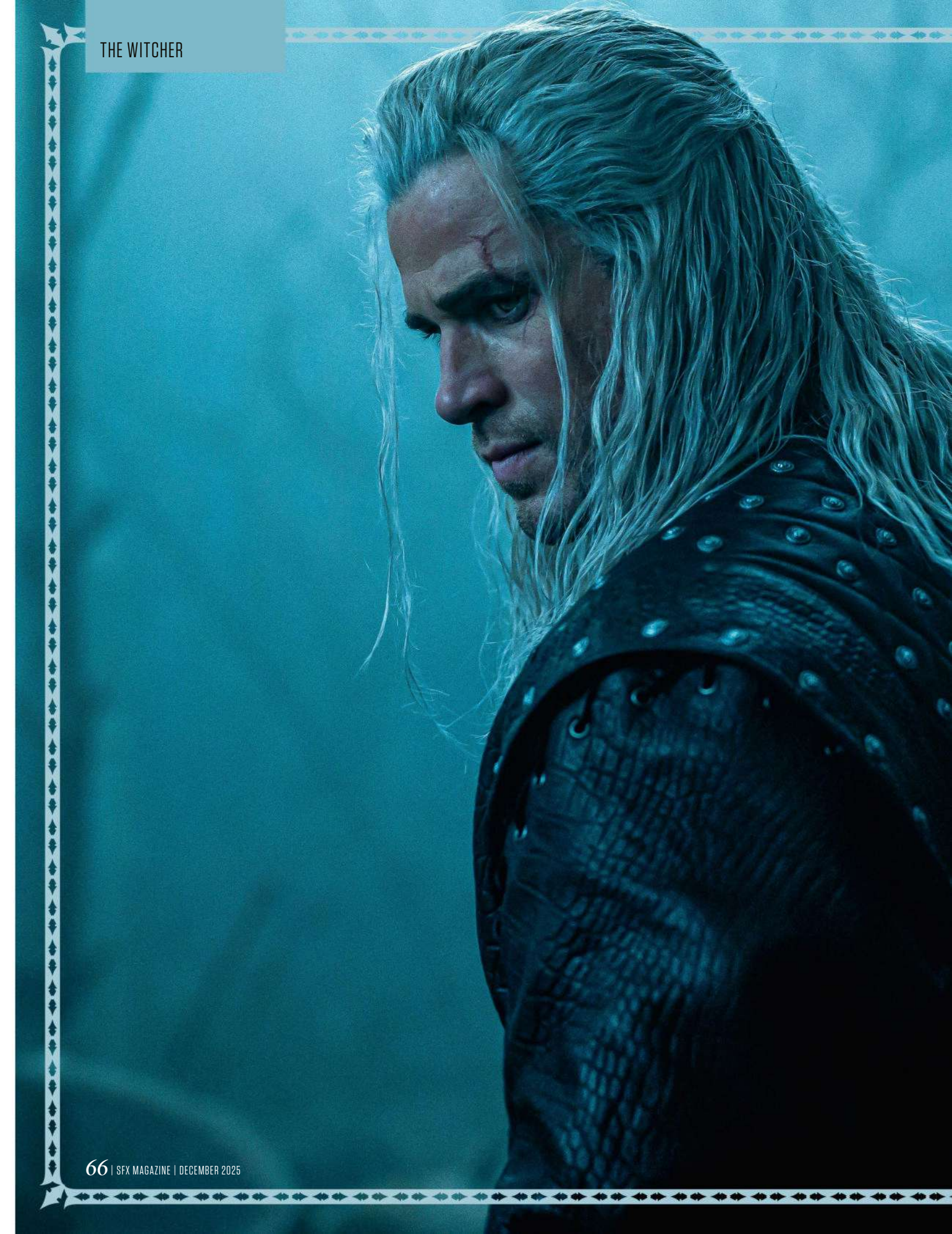
> **"It was really wild making the movie because we were always on the move"**

For Wright and all of the creatives involved in *The Running Man*, it's vital that they honour the book in all of its brutality, desperation and choking atmosphere. Wright at one point refers to his picture as a war movie, while Bacall calls it an underground resistance film, name-checking Jean-Pierre Melville's 1969 film *Army Of Shadows*. It's a pertinent reference given *Army Of Shadows* is as sleek, stylish and suspenseful as it is historical and horrific, and Wright certainly has no intention of reining in his signature energy.

"This is set in a dystopian world that is only five minutes in the future, and it's got the grit, but..." He breaks into a wide smile. "The book is relentlessly grim, but it does have a streak of humour a mile wide. Very dark humour. The satire of what goes into making a TV show, and pain is entertainment. And just because a film is a nightmarish dystopia doesn't mean it can't be entertaining at the same time. I'd say that *Brazil* is one of the bleaker visions of the future that there's ever been, but is it an entertaining film? Absolutely."

Now who wouldn't be sold by that? Run, don't walk, to your nearest cinema.

The Running Man is in cinemas from 14 November.



NEW WITCHER, WHO DIS?

THE WITCHER'S FOURTH SEASON IS MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE. NEW AND OLD, PAST AND PRESENT, TRUTH AND FICTION – *SFX* DIGS IN

WORDS: **CLARISSE LOUGHREY**

Toss a coin to your new Witcher, Liam Hemsworth.

"I'M STILL ME BEFORE I was a mother and after a mother, but it did shift my outlook on the world," says Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, creator, showrunner, and all-round guardian of Netflix's *The Witcher*. When her lead, Henry Cavill, parted ways with the series at the end of season three, it offered Hissrich and her team a chance to pause and consider who Geralt had become over the passing years.

Same white hair. Same yellow eyes. Same belief that the grunt is a valid language unto its own. But the White Wolf has people in his life now, a woman to love (Anya Chalotra's Yennefer) and an adoptive daughter (Freya Allan's Ciri) to care for. At the end of season three, he cast aside his philosophy of neutrality. All that matters now is finding Ciri again, lost after the destruction of the Tor Lara tower.

"That's a definitive life choice for a main character," says Hissrich. "It was the natural time at the top of season four to say, 'Well, how does this change who a person is?'" In a literal sense he becomes Liam Hemsworth, who's strapped on the boots to walk the rest of Geralt's journey across season four and a final fifth season. On a deeper level, Geralt is not only what Hemsworth carries on from Cavill, but what he brings that's entirely his own.

TELLING STORIES

"First of all, there was the acknowledgement that we're not trying to pull one over on the audience," the showrunner explains. "We know that we're bringing in a new lead actor on the show. It hasn't been done a lot. It's a big risk. We're super-excited about it, and so we need to be able to present that this is a different human being behind the white wig and yellow lenses."

As Hemsworth adds, "As a massive fan of the videogame, I really felt I could bring something cool to it", leaning particularly into what Hissrich describes as Geralt's "dry wit".

"I talked to Liam a lot about what he could bring to the character, because Geralt – there's not really a soft bone in his body, but I think there are moments of vulnerability that we play with in season four, where you get to see fear from Geralt," she continues. "It's not something we've ever truly explored, the fear of not getting his family back. I think, in some ways, the timing was really ideal."

"Every time a new person comes to the show," says Joey Batey, who plays Jaskier, bard and faithful companion to Geralt, "our job is to almost overwhelmingly welcome them. We're quite fervent about it. There's lots of hugging.

"Liam can make me corpse pretty easily. We can get a bit mischievous occasionally"

There's lots of, 'Come here, we're going for a quick pint.' We all did that with Liam. We all just went, 'Okay, you're part of the gang now.'

"And Liam took total ownership of the role from day one. I remember our first rehearsals together, he came in with ideas about the script, and those creative conversations with the showrunner continued, because he has the one thing that I would ask of any collaborator – he turned up and cared. It helps that we make each other laugh, too. I tend to be the one who's trying to make people corpse, but Liam can make me corpse pretty easily. We can get a bit mischievous occasionally."

It's rare for a series to be able to plan its own end so far in advance. So as much as Hemsworth may offer new life, what lies at the end of season five has given these new episodes an unexpectedly self-reflective quality. "It's this sense of, actually, we can come back to the truth," says Hissrich. "We can come back to the foundation of stories." Her words here have a dual meaning: the stories refer, in part, the source material written by Andrzej Sapkowski, with season four drawing from *Baptism Of Fire* and *The Tower Of The Swallow*, and season five weaving in *The Lady Of The Lake*, which ends Sapkowski's series.

But it's also about the stories told within *The Witcher*, sung by Jaskier as a way to preserve the history he sees unfolding around him. "It's been really fun saying that, even beyond the stories that we're telling, the stories of the Witcher go on – the stories of this family that we've built, and that Jaskier keeps alive," the showrunner says.

"Jaskier's discovered that respect does make history and that his job isn't to create stories," Batey says. "It's simply to tell them, to tell the stories that matter, to tell the stories of the farmers and the young men and women who are going to war untrained. This is somewhat reflective of conflicts in our own universe, and his job is to try and just tell those stories so that tyranny and totalitarianism cannot be weaponised as effectively."

The heroes of these stories, at this point, lie scattered to the four winds. Geralt traverses the woods, with Jaskier and archer Milva (Meng'er Zhang) by his side. "He is injured and

frustrated but his main driving force is to find Ciri and make sure she is safe," Hemsworth says. "He has doubts about whether he is physically and mentally strong enough but he cannot waste any time."

Over time, their party swells, as they're joined by fighters Zoltan (Danny Woodburn) and Yarpen (Jeremy Crawford), and, more unexpectedly, the once-antagonistic Cahir (Eamon Farren), who Hemsworth suggests has "changed a little" (or has he?). Fans of the books know this group as the Hansa. Fans of the show will too, in due course.

Both on screen and off, this little family was blessed by the presence of a screen legend this season: Laurence Fishburne, here in the role of →

Que Ciri, Sera

Freya Allan still can't believe she gets to play Ciri

When you posted sketches of your Rats castmates on Instagram and wrote "the most special season", what did that mean to you?

It was just at the time because now I'd say that season five was the most special. But that's for different reasons – season four is still incredibly special to me, because I got to be a part of a gang of people that were my age. I always felt like the younger one on set, the child, you know? In season four as Ciri I was able to come into what she is beyond the child of the show. And in that as well, I, as Freya, got to become really good friends with this group of young people.

What does it mean that she's taken on the name Falka, despite having this moment last season of rejecting the rage and power her legend represents?

For me it was her first kill at the end of season three. She's always got this ghost haunting her, this idea of, is she a monster? Is she evil? So when she does have her first kill, she almost, in order to deal with that, has to take on this new person who represented a lot of death and violence. That symbolised this new step of, I'm no longer going to have Geralt and Yennefer to protect me in that way. I am going to have to kill people now. That's the death of childhood.

What does it feel like knowing that soon your journey with this series will be at its end?

I feel like I was really falling in love with her in season four, but season five, especially, I feel like she's given me so much confidence. Getting to play her in the way I've been able to play her has just been amazing. I feel like I love her too much, because sometimes I have to pinch myself, like, "Oh my god... I play her."

Laurence Fishburne as new character Regis.

It's not all fun, games and fighting on the Continent.

Liam Hemsworth takes a moment.

Regis, an expert in tinctures with a secret stuffed up his sleeve.

"I think there would be a hushed reverence on set if Laurence didn't walk on saying, 'What's up, baby?' and was the loudest, most joyous man in the world," Bates says, with a chuckle. "Of course, he's a legend of the industry, but within the first couple of days of shooting it didn't feel like it, because he loves to play. As soon as he felt that improvisational energy with me, he was like, 'Oh, I'm going to throw it back at you and with a vengeance.'"

"One of my favourite things about Laurence is that you can basically give him anything to say and he can deliver it with such gravitas," says Hissrich. "In one of the episodes he refers to 'attractive booty'. Writing that in the script – is that man ever going to say the phrase 'attractive booty'? He does, and he delivers it perfectly."

Ciri, meanwhile, is now fully embedded in the Rats, a band of misfit teen thieves. "There's something inviting to them, because they represent an element of freedom she hasn't had," says Allan. "She was able to meet these people who don't know who she is, they don't know she's a princess.

"But at the same time, even if she is hiding a lot of her past, she's able to come into a different version of herself that she hasn't been able to be around Geralt and Yennefer.

"It's difficult to sometimes realise in a fantasy show – with all the magic and this, that, and the other – that it is essentially based around a time of war. In war, people will reside with people that they wouldn't necessarily be friends with, because of the circumstances. That's what this is. They all share a commonality in what they've been through and, as a group, they're able to try and release that weight from their shoulders and just have this chaotic, free energy together."

"Literally, the books didn't leave my side. I brought so many of my favourite quotes"

A part of that involves Ciri's first romantic entanglement, with the group's enforcer, Mistle (Christelle Elwin). "I really wanted to uphold a feeling of what's in the books," Allan remarks, "Of there being that complexity – it not being perfect, there being this very human need to have companionship, but not necessarily in the right situation or with the right person for the right reason."

For Yennefer, companionship is more of a practical necessity than a desire. "Yennefer has always been a lone wolf," says Chalotra. But Vilgefortz (Mahesh Jadu), the powerful mage aligned with Nilfgaard, is after Ciri, and Yennefer "needs the mages from every corner of the Continent" to quash his dangerous ambitions.

"As their new leader, she can see the female mages have always been pitted against each other," the actor says. "From the beginning, they have existed in a man's world, there to protect and preserve the status quo. For the first time they are able to come together, without that culture."

"In season four, one of the things we talked a lot about is, 'What shade haven't we seen on Yennefer yet?'" says Hissrich. "We obviously see her grapple with motherhood. We've seen her hot and cold relationship with Geralt. We've seen her struggle with her own power. I realised, again, I take a lot of lessons from my own motherhood, the maternal instinct of, 'What wouldn't I do for my kids?'

"There is a line of stage direction in the first episode of season four where it says Yennefer is 'a woman on fire'. We're starting to see a bit of a warrior come out. This is one of my favourite seasons of hers, because she really gets to shine."

"Season five for me has been a total gift," says Allan. "There are storylines that I've been waiting and waiting to do, so it was really important to me that I did everything in my power to contribute what I could to give people what they want to see, and also what I want to see for my last season.

"Literally, the books didn't leave my side. I brought so many of my favourite quotes from the book to it and really would fight for things that I felt were crucial to keep. Luckily, a lot of it was already there. It was pretty loyal."

The future beyond that is yet unwritten. The possibility of spin-offs is "sort of up in the air",

Ciri (Freya Allan) says goodbye to... who?

Sometimes it's best to keep out of the way...

Yennefer (Anya Chalotra): messed-up.

according to Hissrich, "because, honestly, the real focus for us has to be this mothership. I think very early on in this series I was, like, '*The Witcher* could last for hundreds of years'. The truth, though, is that I always wanted to end the stories where the original book series ended. So *The Lady Of The Lake* – I think it is such a gorgeous wrap-up of these stories."

"I have no idea what the future is going to hold but, I have to say, all I've wanted to do is end this series gracefully, making sure that we get everything out that we wanted to say – and, most importantly, to give Geralt, Ciri, and Yennefer the endings they deserve."

The Witcher is on Netflix.

STOCK ART: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY

A Bard Day's Night

Joey Batey brings that little bit of Britishness to Jaskier

You've talked in the past about the fact you've had quite a bit of room to improv. Is that still true now the writers are more familiar with your performance?
The collaboration that I have with Lauren [Schmidt Hissrich] and the other writers was established really early on in season one, and we were able to find this lovely dialogue between us that meant that I have a little bit of freedom to dance around the script. Most of the writers, I believe, are American – and so to bring a little bit of Britishness to it was quite important, and that's endured.

What can you tease about season five? How closely does Jaskier's storyline adhere to what happens in the books?
For fans of the books, they will see a closer adherence, particularly in season five. The final books of this series, for those who've read them, in a good way, they get very strange. The writers went, "Well, we just need to get out of our own way and let the Andrzej Sapkowski work shine through". So yes, of course, there's going to be deviations. But the key events, I think people will be pleased to see how they're represented.

What does it feel like knowing that soon your journey with this series will be at its end?
Lots of other iterations have come before – John Schwab, who plays him in the games, Peter Kenny, who's done the audiobooks. Everyone's brought something unique to this character. There may be future books. There may be future games. I would, of course, be open to returning to him, but he's such a joyous person to play that if someone else gets a chance to sit in his coat and his hat, then... I think I'd be a little envious, but I would understand why someone would fight for their life to play this character, because I've loved every second of it.

"Jaskier?" "Yes?" "Shut up."

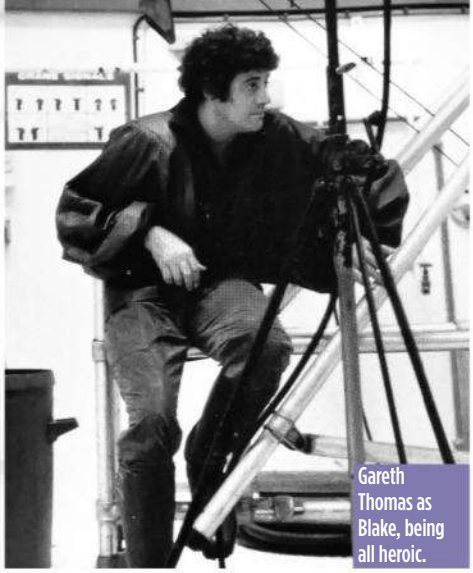
"Hang on, I feel a song coming on..."

CALLY'S WAR

AS SERIES TWO HITS BLU-RAY, BLAKE'S 7 STAR JAN CHAPPELL TELEPORTS BACK TO HER DAYS ABOARD THE LIBERATOR

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Jan Chappell as the enigmatic Cally.


Gareth Thomas as Blake, being all heroic.

"WHEN PEOPLE SAY they don't believe telepathy exists I find myself sincerely confounded. How could you believe that it doesn't?"

Jan Chappell isn't just defending a key aspect of Cally, the psychically gifted interstellar rebel she played in *Blake's 7*. She's speaking from personal experience.

"It's just an everyday part of my life and always has been," she shares, revealing how she found her way into a character unlike any she had played before. "Cally was telepathic, which I identified with. I studied it when I was at school, along with handwriting and hypnotism, because I loved going to the library and pulling out books on all sorts of things.

"I suppose I was 13 or 14. We'd go to the little hockey shed at lunchtime and do one of the experiments. One of the girls would kneel in the middle of a circle and the rest of us would go away and secretly decide on an image. We'd touch the girl's shoulder and try and communicate that symbol – a square with a star in the middle or an oblong or whatever it was – and the girl would draw what she thought she had picked up from us. Nine times out of 10 it was absolutely accurate. What more can you say?

"My family used to call me the Witch!"

Chappell is engaging, unguarded company when *SFX* meets her over Americanos in an Art Deco-styled London brasserie so elegant you expect to find Poirot truffling for clues among the potted palms. She's as happy to chat about paranormal phenomena as the inner workings of the Royal Shakespeare Company, but with the imminent arrival of *Blake's 7* series two on Blu-ray, the conversation inevitably turns to the time she fought the Federation on primetime BBC One.

"I was a bit doubtful whether this would be a good move," she remembers of being offered her first regular role on television. "I had what you might call a classic career, and I'd done straight plays in reputable theatres like the Royal Court. I'd done one-offs in series, but never the whole seven o'clock soap opera slot. It's actually in the BBC production notes: 'Jan Chappell is not certain whether she wants to accept this job'!

"But it was a godsend. I was now a new mother and it meant I was able to afford a qualified nanny. And I didn't remain doubtful. I was excited. I was thrilled to have a job, and it was marvellous to think it was a series. [Producer] David Maloney said, 'You might become well-known and recognised in the streets. Could you handle that? You might be asked to open supermarkets...' I thought, 'Well, yeah, I could deal with that!'"

> **"None of us could understand why the BBC didn't have more faith in us"**

Gareth Thomas not taking things entirely seriously.

And did her life change when *Blake's 7* launched in 1978? "Not really, no. It was just nice being recognised. I didn't mind. And of course it was kids, too, shouting 'Cally!' from across the road."

Throwing in her lot with the Liberator in "Time Squad", the fourth episode of series one, Cally's calling as a freedom fighter left her exiled from her homeworld of Auron. Chappell was playing the only non-human among the original crew. Did she try and emphasise that alien quality in her performance?

"The only thing I did attempt in the early stages was to try and speak with a little hesitation, as if I was talking a second language. But I didn't sustain that for very long. I had to talk myself out of wearing black contact lenses. I just thought, 'That's going to diminish one's ability to communicate.' I would have really missed that. Also I'd never worn contact lenses, and in those days they were hard lenses, not something you could easily adjust. I just didn't like the idea."

WARRING STARS

The politically incendiary '70s had seen the rise of the female militant, from Patty Hearst to the PLO's Leila Khaled and Ulrike Meinhof of the Baader-Meinhof gang. Did such headline-stealing figures inform Chappell's take on Cally in any way?

"No," she says, emphatically. "I didn't relate to that at all. I mean, I was very aware of the Baader-Meinhof, but I didn't think of that political element. Might it have shaped the creation of the character? I think it probably did. But we weren't killers, were we? We weren't monsters. We were doing it for a very good reason."

Blake's 7 arrived just as another tale of rebellion against a galactic tyranny was playing out in Britain. Smashing the box office during the run of series one, *Star Wars* led a global gold rush for all things SF.

"None of us could understand why the BBC didn't have more faith in us and give the effects some money," Chappell recalls. "We would say, 'People are loving *Star Wars*! Why are they not putting money in this series? It could be so good!' Because we were aware of the limitations of cheap sets and so on."

The timing was fantastic but did *Star Wars* feel like competition? Some of the show's

In series two, the outfits got a bit more... extravagant.

The "classic" crew line up for a press shot.

Jan Chappell, not enjoying her shorter hair.

directors were certainly daunted by the prospect of going up against the multi-million dollar firepower of George Lucas. "No, it's ridiculous to think that. We were television and that was a big movie. It was completely different. But we were cross and we did discuss it, quite animatedly. 'Invest money! This is the time to do it!'"

Chappell's co-star Sally Knyvette, who played smuggler and pilot Jenna Stannis, has been vocal about the frustration she felt at her character being underused and underwritten.

"I wasn't as frustrated as Sally," Chappell confides. "Sally was demanding a lot more of her part and seemed to see a lot of it quite negatively. She definitely felt more intensely about it, because she ended up leaving, didn't she? I wasn't so sensitive about it all, though there was a point at which it seemed so predictable that Cally was going to be in another trance, where they didn't know what to do.

"That happened too frequently. I could have said something about that, but I didn't really appreciate that one had that kind of influence. I was just used to being given a script and you did it.

"To be honest I was quite pleased when it was a light episode, because I was a working mother – 'Oh, I'm not in this much! I can get home!' So the demands I made on the job weren't the same, because I was doing two jobs, if you see what I mean. So, no, I was just delighted to be there. It was great fun. We had a laugh.

"Not that we didn't work hard, because we did, and that's why the series worked, because we laughed, we were a team, we shared things. There was a sort of oneness about it all. At the same time we were acting the best we could. We were dedicating ourselves. We weren't taking the job lightly."

Why were the show's female leads so often left to operate the Liberator's teleport console? Was it simply ingrained sexism in the scripting?

"Oh god, I can't get into all that," sighs Chappell. "I just think we have to be patient. Things change, you know? One can shout about it but then it becomes so tiresome. I'm bored with all that. You know, Helen Mirren did a great job in *Prime Suspect*. *Cagney & Lacey* did a great job. Jan and Sally did a great job.

"We've both met girls who have said they became scientists and engineers because as kids they watched Cally and Jenna running around, doing technical stuff. They thought, 'Oh, they're doing those things. Maybe we could.' We did our bit for feminism, that's for sure, even if we weren't quite so aware we were doing that."

Conceived as "*The Dirty Dozen* in space", *Blake's 7* was the creation of Terry Nation, father of the Daleks. Did Chappell get to know this TV legend? "No. I just saw him briefly. I just remember him passing through."

A remote, godlike figure, then, up above it all? "No, just this bloke who wrote scripts!"

At one point Nation considered bringing the Daleks into *Blake's 7*, bridging the BBC's two great sci-fi franchises. "I heard about that. I would have thought it was terrific fun. Sally and I would be saying, 'Do we have a fight with a Dalek?' We would have been thrilled by that. I would have welcomed a crossover with *Doctor Who*. It would have been a right laugh!"

Chappell is here to bang the drum for the series two Blu-ray, but as she reveals it's a year that holds mixed memories for her. "They cut my hair, which I wasn't happy about. I was never happy until it grew again. They said it was a good idea so I went along with it and then was very upset about it afterwards. I ruined the continuity one day because I took scissors to it, to try and make it look a bit better. I was quite depressed about it. I didn't like the extravagant costumes. To me they weren't appropriate. It wasn't good to be running around in great long capes."

Chappell winces with a smirk. "The technicians called me Olive Oyl on set! I said, 'Look, I must have shoes that I can run in. I don't want to be running around in boots. So someone chose a pair of Hush Puppies. I had these green tights, this long cloak with this big wide collar, my hair short, with my long neck... and they called me Olive Oyl!" She hides her face, laughing. "That finished me off!"

Things could have been even more unpleasant, *SFX* suggests. After all, *Blake's 7* was known to film at Oldbury nuclear power station, rigging up pyrotechnics in areas usually forbidden to the public. From a 21st century health and safety perspective it looks a little hairy, to say the least. How did Chappell feel at the time?

"*Freaked out!* I hated the idea of going to a power station anyway. I'd been nursing until then and I knew that I was not going to risk being irradiated and be feeding my baby on my breast while I was working in a power station! It was scary.

"Also I couldn't understand people being happy to eat their sandwiches up there. Nobody else was allowed to. Where those big explosions happened, there was a whole wall taped off, black and yellow, warning you not to cross because there was radiation.

"I was very pleased when we got out of there. That's when I said, 'If I do another →

++INFORMATION++

What's on the *Blake's 7* series two Blu-ray?

DISC ONE
"REDEMPTION"/"SHADOW"

- Two episodes restored in HD, with optional CG special effects and commentaries

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES
- Character introduction: Orac

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES
- *Liberation* – series two documentary
- Photo gallery: "Redemption"/"Shadow"
- Trails and continuities – series two
- Spaceworld model footage
- Clean opening titles – series one and two
- Clean closing titles – series one and two
- Clean opening titles (new FX) – series one and two

PDFS
- *Radio Times*: series two
- Series two concept document
- BBC Drama early warning synopses
- Programme-as-completed documents
- Audience research reports
- "Death Squad": unmade draft script
- "Redemption": production documentation, rehearsal script, camera script
- "Shadow": transmission camera script
- "Weapon": rehearsal script, camera script
- "Horizon": rehearsal script, transmission camera script
- "Pressure Point": camera script
- "Trial": rehearsal script, transmission script, Liberator scenes camera script
- "Killer": rehearsal script, transmission camera script
- "Hostage": rehearsal script, transmission camera script
- "Countdown": rehearsal script, transmission camera script
- "Voice From The Past": revised rehearsal script, camera script
- "Gambit": camera script
- "The Keeper": camera script
- "Star One": rehearsal script, camera script

DISC TWO
"WEAPON"/"HORIZON"

- Two episodes restored in HD, with optional CG special effects and commentary on "Horizon"

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES
- Brian Croucher on auditioning for Blake (Easter egg)

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES
- *In Conversation: Brian Croucher*
- Tellycon 1999 convention: Brian Croucher
- Photo gallery: "Weapon"/"Horizon"
- Series two visual effects

DISC THREE
"PRESSURE POINT"/"TRIAL"

- Two episodes restored in HD, with optional CG special effects and commentary on "Trial"

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES
- *Giant*: David Jackson tribute documentary
- *The Making Of Blake's 7 – Part Two* (Unseen DVD documentary)
- Photo gallery: "Pressure Point"

DISC FOUR
"KILLER"/"HOSTAGE"

- Two episodes restored in HD, with optional CG special effects

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES
- Sally Knyvette talking about the character of Inga (Easter egg)

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES
- *Maximum: The Life Of Jacqueline Pearce*
- Photo gallery: "Killer"/"Hostage"

DISC FIVE
"COUNTDOWN"/"VOICE FROM THE PAST"

- Two episodes restored in HD, with optional CG special effects

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES
- Brian Croucher talking about "Voice From The Past" (Easter egg)
- *Multi-Coloured Swap Shop*: BBC One, 10 March 1979, Gareth Thomas and Jacqueline Pearce

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES
- *In Conversation: Roger Murray-Leach*
- *Blake's 7: The Collection Series Two* Blu-ray trailer
- Photo gallery: "Countdown"/"Voice From The Past"
- Deliverance 1998 convention: Jan Chappell, Sally Knyvette and Jacqueline Pearce

DISC SIX
"GAMBIT"/"THE KEEPER"/"STAR ONE"

- Three episodes restored in HD, with optional CG special effects and commentaries

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES
- *Pebble Mill*, BBC One, 11 April 1979, BBC Radiophonic Workshop
- *Small World*, BBC Two, 28 August 1980, Models documentary
- *Saturday Superstore*, BBC One, 8 January 1983, Mat Irvine
- *Scene Today*, BBC One, 24 January 1991, Gareth Thomas and Jacqueline Pearce
- Sally Knyvette talking about Bruce Purchase (Easter egg)
- DVD series three trailer
- *Mat's Models*
- Mutoids featurette
- *The Ballad Of Travis II*
- DVD CG opening sequence, series two
- DVD menu theme loop

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES
- Photo gallery: "Gambit"/"The Keeper"/"Star One"
- *Ask Aspel*, BBC One, 12 June 1979, Paul Darrow
- "Star One" audio bloopers

STOCK IMAGES: MAROOSHKA/GETTY

> **"If there were looks exchanged, that's just us being close as crew members"**

series, I'm not going to a nuclear power station again.' But David Maloney had decided it wasn't a good idea anyway. It looked great, though!"

Over the years fans have pounced on hints of a romantic frisson between Avon and Cally. Did that exist on the page, *SFX* wonders, or was it something worked out purely between Chappell and co-star Paul Darrow?

"We never had any discussion about that relationship. I don't think it was ever evident in the scripts. I think it was all in the audience's mind, myself. We did kiss in 'Sarcophagus', but it wasn't part of my performance. If there were looks exchanged at certain times that's just us being close as crew members. I didn't bring any sexual desire for Paul into it!" she laughs.

Maybe he brought some? "He might have done! We never discussed it. I never got that feeling myself. I don't think Paul would think it was there. Because I never got that from him.

"We knew there was not supposed to be any sex onboard. We never even discussed these things." No sharing of bunks on the Liberator, then? "Darling, we didn't do that! We all had our own bunks! Just like we had our own dressing rooms!"

CALLY GONE

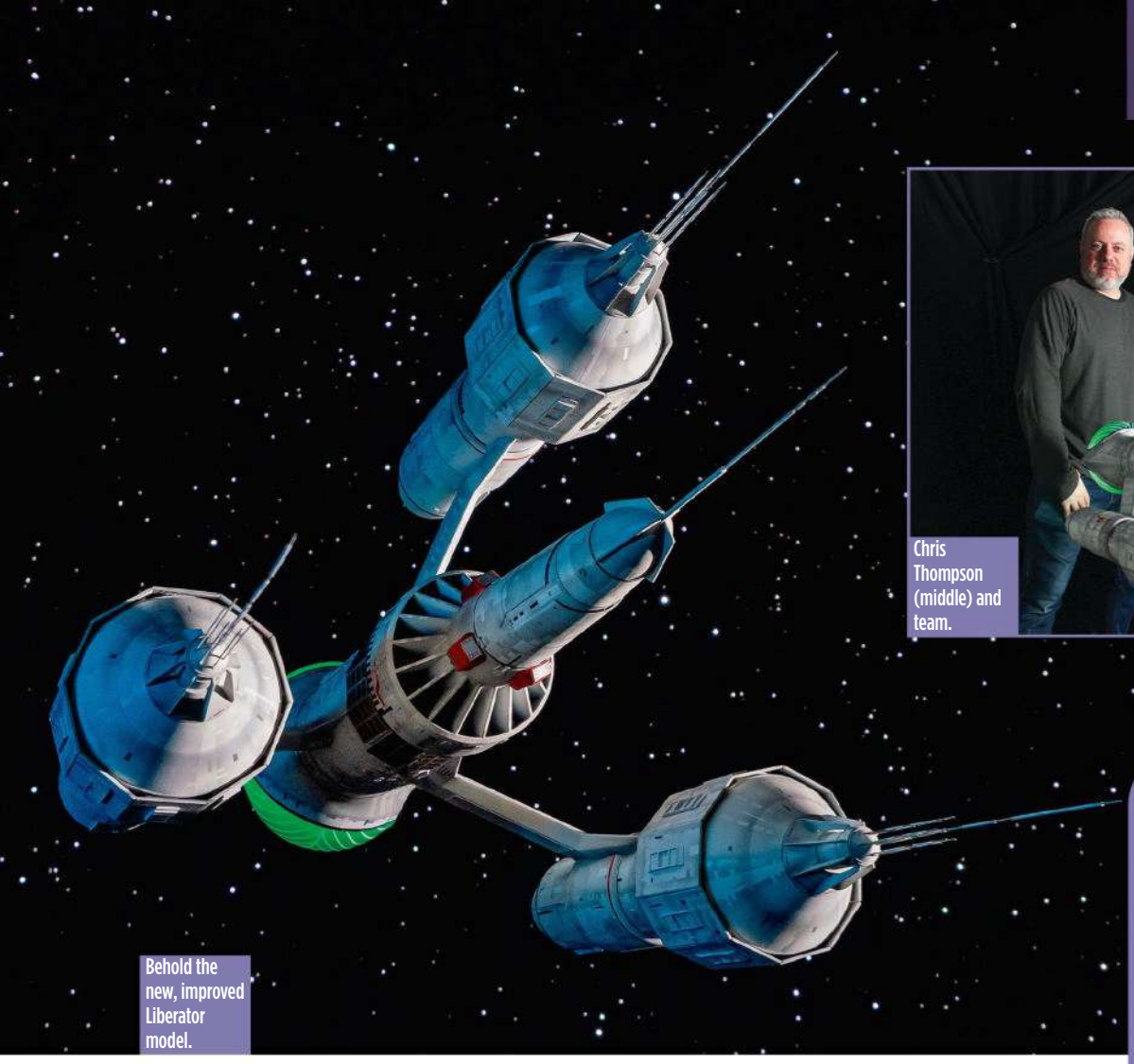
Chappell made the decision to leave *Blake's 7* halfway through the third series. "I was watching actors I knew going up to do a recording of a Shakespeare at the BBC. I was so jealous. I maintained being positive, but I knew there was no way I could do a fourth series, because I'd lost my enthusiasm. Also the BBC never made us feel treasured. We felt they were embarrassed by it or something.

"So I turned down series four. They were trying very hard to get me to leave properly. I said no to five episodes, no to two, no to one. I said, 'I'll do a voiceover.' They said 'Alright.' If I'd known the fans were so serious about it I might have made a different decision, for their sake. I didn't even watch the fourth series," she confesses. "You'd think I'd be curious, wouldn't you?"

Surely part of her wishes she had been part of that immortal final scene, getting gunned down in slow-motion on Gauda Prime? Chappell gives a mischievous smile that could throw a Federation trooper off his aim.

"Je ne regrette rien!"

Blake's 7 The Collection: Series Two is out on 10 November.



Behold the new, improved Liberator model.

Chris Thompson (middle) and team.

MOST EFFECTIVE

FX upgrade
++CONFIRMED++

The series two Blu-ray set once again offers optional new effects, blending CG with freshly filmed practical modelwork. "We had much longer on series two, which meant we could reflect on what worked and what didn't," says Chris Thompson, part of the 2025 effects team. "We had more time to refine each shot.

"One big difference was having [original BBC effects man] Mat Irvine on hand. Mat kept so much of his original filming materials that we were able to reuse elements such as planets and skies. We also got to do some new stuff with Mat's legendary 'hairdryer spaceship' [an Andromedan scout craft, built from two Morphy Richards hairdryers] that hopefully will prove once and for all that it was always a great little design."

An improved Liberator was commissioned from modelmaker Richard Ashton – "A close match to the original," Thompson tells *SFX* – and there's a new Spaceworld, interior replacing stock footage of a plane arriving at Gatwick. "We've done something a little more... elaborate.

"We also shot some live-action elements with a Federation trooper outfit for 'Countdown' and 'Star One', adding in some establishing shots that hopefully make the universe of *Blake's 7* a little bigger. Also I endeavoured to make 'speed chess' a little more exciting..."

Who needs CG when you can make a model like *this*?

Stop messing around, there's work to be done.

Prepping a Federation Pursuit Ship.

A shuttle from "Voice From The Past".

If in doubt, put more screws in.

Federation Space Command.

The Man In

The White Suit

IT'S 25 YEARS SINCE ITC CLASSIC RANDALL AND HOPKIRK (DECEASED) WAS REVIVED AS A REEVES AND MORTIMER VEHICLE. WE LOOK BACK IN THE COMPANY OF SHOWRUNNER CHARLIE HIGSON

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

EVEN IF YOU'VE NEVER SEEN the original *Randall And Hopkirk (Deceased)*, you probably know its brilliant premise. One of numerous telefantasy shows produced by Lew Grade's ITC, it centred on two private eyes – one of whom, after dying in the first episode, continues to assist his partner as a white-suited ghost. The show aired for one season, from 1969-1970.

Twenty-eight years later, the ITC library was acquired by Universal's parent company, clearing the way for another Universal subsidiary, WTTV (the television arm of Working Title) to make use of their properties. When word got out that they were planning to resurrect *Randall And Hopkirk (Deceased)*, it piqued the interest of a comedy double-act.

"Jim [Moir, aka Vic Reeves] and Bob [Mortimer] heard about this, and their agents got in touch with Working Title and said, 'They'd really love to be in this'," explains Charlie Higson, who'd worked with the pair on *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* and their subsequent BBC comedy shows.

"Jim and Bob were always looking for ways to get into mainstream TV. So at that point it became an attractive package. The guy running it [WTTV] said, 'Do you have anyone you would like to write it?' And they suggested me."

The resulting series – which ran for 13 45-minute episodes – had a more flexible format than its predecessor. At times it has a *The Avengers* vibe. One episode is basically folk horror. And it bows out with pure surrealism. Higson recalls some advice he received from Peter Salmon, the Controller of BBC One: "'Charlie, it's Vic and Bob, and one of the characters is a ghost, but make sure it's grounded as a good, recognisable detective story.'

"I took his point, but at the same time I thought, 'Christ, if you've got a TV series with Vic and Bob in, and one of them's a ghost, you don't want to do just a mundane, standard detective series.

"Those shows in the '60s were great: *The Prisoner*, *The Champions*, *Adam Adamant Lives!* I really wanted to bring back that style – escapist, not kitchen sink reality," he continues. "The [original] series was fun, but never quite as big and as iconic as something like *The Avengers*. It was a bit dingy, and there was quite a lot about it that I wanted to get away from."

Higson's revival had an out-of-time feel, from the leather skirts routinely rocked by Emilia Fox's Jeannie (the third corner of the show's central love triangle), to the Mercedes coupe driven by Bob Mortimer's Marty Hopkirk. "We had a 'No jeans and trainers' policy," Higson says.

"I wanted the nature of it to be that each episode they'd go into a different world, and the real world doesn't impinge. That's very much what I took from the original *Avengers*, where you never see them walking down an ordinary high street, going to Tesco – it's always a slightly weird, heightened reality that they're in."

Achieving that was his greatest challenge as showrunner. "That's expensive, because you're going to different locations the whole time. We had a fantastic creative team working on it – costume, make-up, the design team – but that's time-consuming, and location shooting is hard work, it's a daily fight. We got through it, but I was really, really exhausted by the end of it. A level of PTSD, really!"

Jim, Bob and Emilia strike some poses for *TV Times*.

TEARS OF A CLOWN

For his two leads, meanwhile, the most daunting challenge was dramatic acting. In his autobiography, Bob Mortimer recalls dreading scenes such as one which required him to weep →

Marty fails to master transfiguration of ectoplasm.

PORTRAITS: TREVOR LEIGHTON/TV TIMES. EPISODIC PICTURES © BBC.

“Everybody had fun creating this afterlife with Tom Baker as basically God”

by his dead colleague’s grave (eventually achieved with the aid of a tear stick). “The parts were written as Vic and Bob, really,” Higson says. “They’re not trained dramatic actors, but they’re great comic actors, so I wanted it to have a lot of fun and fantasy, and for them to enjoy doing it. Slightly unfortunately, Bob, because he got more the straight man part, felt that he ought to be acting – no matter how much I said, ‘Bob, don’t act! Just be yourself.’

“Sometimes if I wasn’t there I’d find the director had pushed things a bit too far – ‘Bob, it’d be great if you cried.’ I don’t want to see Bob Mortimer crying! I wanted it to skate lightly over the surface like a lot of those original series did, when nobody’s really that upset about anything.”

Interestingly, reversing the roles was discussed. “Jim and Bob said, ‘Bob is physically more like Kenneth Cope [Marty Hopkirk], and Jim is physically more like Mike Pratt [Jeff Randall], might it be better that way around?’” Higson reveals. But since Moir had worn a white suit on *Vic Reeves Big Night Out*, Higson always assumed he would play the ghost.

“I said, ‘Well no, because the point is you’re famous for wearing a white suit. That’s what people will want to see.’ I’ve often thought since that maybe it might have worked better the other way around. Bob could have been more this ethereal presence, not having to carry a lot of the emotional weight, and could have popped up – a bit like on *Big Night Out*, where Vic’s carrying the thing, and Bob turns up and sabotages. Maybe that way round they would have enjoyed it more.”

Moir certainly had a good time whenever Randall was paired with Wyvern, his spectral mentor – played by a former Doctor Who. “I created what they didn’t have in the original, which was what does he do when he’s not popping up as a ghost?” Higson says.

“No jeans, no trainers” was one of the show’s rules.

Bob Mortimer does his best to blub in the first episode.

Charlie Higson (right) as civil servant Bulstrode.

Tom Baker was Marty’s mentor, Wyvern.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" "Of course not, carry on."

"Everybody had fun creating this afterlife with Tom Baker as basically God. You can see that Jim has huge fun with Tom, and they sparred a certain amount – they both have healthy egos!"

"90% of Tom Baker's scenes were filmed in a giant bluescreen studio, because we'd created this digital world that he lived in," he continues. "It was quite surreal: you'd go in and there'd be these two guys dressed in white against all this nothingness. Tom was enormously professional, but didn't take it seriously for a moment. He had a lot to put across, having to explain what was going on. I said to him, 'Is there anything you want to go through?' He said, 'Oh don't worry, I can rattle off this whippet shit in my sleep! I used to do *Doctor Who* – I had reams of this stuff. I didn't understand a single fucking word, Charlie, but I could do it.' And he nailed it every time."

The series also boasted impressive supporting casts, routinely crammed with familiar faces from the '60s and '70s. Hywel Bennett, Peter Bowles, Eleanor Bron, Roy Hudd, Derek Jacobi, Freddie Jones, Dudley Sutton, Gareth Thomas...

"Jim, Bob and me all loved those old shows, and wanted to get as many of those guys in as we could," Higson says. "All the actors jumped at doing it, because they said, 'We never get the chance to do this. Nobody is making this stuff.' British drama was kitchen sink – it was judged on how realistic it was. I said, 'This is a chance to come in and play an outrageous character and have fun with it.' So just about every time we got the cast we wanted."

WHERE'S THE FIRE?

When the series debuted on BBC One on 18 March 2000, it was a ratings success – despite ITV shifting ratings behemoth *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* into the same timeslot. "We still got 10 and a half million viewers," Higson recalls. Off the back of that, a second series was swiftly commissioned.

"Unfortunately, because not everybody *got* the show – it wasn't what TV normally looked like – the viewing figures slipped every week. It never caught fire in that way where it became a thing everyone's talking about. By the very last episode we were down to about three million viewers, so the BBC couldn't justify pushing it on."

That final episode is quite bizarre. Set in an abandoned department store, it sees our heroes bouncing on giant trampoline beds, and being menaced by an outsized Punch and Judy. "By then the BBC had told us they weren't going to commission another series. So we thought, 'Well, let's just go bonkers!'"

Looking back, Higson is proud of what he achieved. "I can still look at it and remember, 'God, that was a hard day,' and think, 'We didn't get the shots we needed here because it wasn't going smoothly, therefore it's gone a bit hard to follow.' But I think we did something quite special. It was an ambitious show. It had a lot of style. And I made the show that I really wanted to make..."

And perhaps we should give the series credit for preparing the way for another revival of a '60s classic. "It was quite hard to find other writers for it, because I needed people who could do drama *and* fantasy," Higson says. "But there had been these various writers who'd kept the flame of *Doctor Who* lit by writing books in the '90s, like Gareth Roberts [writer/co-writer of two episodes] and Mark Gatiss [who co-wrote the final episode], and Russell T Davies. I tried to get Russell to write an episode of *Randall & Hopkirk*, but couldn't get him. People who came from that world – mostly gay men – who understood about drama and fantasy storytelling, at the same time.

"I didn't manage to pull off bringing back that style of TV, but Russell T Davies did a few years after, and a lot of the people involved in that had worked on *Randall & Hopkirk*," Higson notes. "People like [composer] Murray Gold, Mark Gatiss, Gareth Roberts.

"Russell was keener on the dramatic side of things – rooting it in Billie Piper [as Rose]'s family and her world. So I was pleased when *Doctor Who* managed to get it right and get big viewing figures. It did that thing we didn't do – it tipped over, and became a thing that everyone wanted to watch."

Charlie Higson's latest collaboration with Jim Moir is Willie, Willie, Harry, Stee, a history of British kings and queens. It's out now, published by Mudlark.

Things all go "bonkers" in the series two finale.

Cope And Seethe

Why a star of the original turned them down

In a nod to the original Marty, Kenneth Cope, the duo's office was located in "Cope House". A scene in episode one also mentions Spooner Drive and Berman Street – a homage to story consultant Dennis Spooner and producer Monty Berman. But Higson had a more substantial callback in mind: a guest appearance by Cope.

"I had a couple of meetings with him," Higson recalls. "He was quite difficult, quite a prickly character. He felt very proprietorial about the show. He felt this is *his* show, why are these people taking it away from him – and why aren't they doing it properly?"

Sadly, being offered a cameo put the actor's nose out of joint. "It was written to be quite shadowy, so you don't know who it is at first," Higson explains. "We thought it'd be fun to have him pop up. But he was put out because he thought he was being asked in to play a regular character." In the end, the role went to Steven Berkoff instead.

ITV/SHUTTERSTOCK

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

TASHA SURI

Mythical country: the fantasy writer tells us about her new novel

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Shekhar Bhatia

THERE ARE NARRATIVES THAT SEEM TO be easily incorporated into our shared national story, and others that are just as easily excluded. Before she came to write her remarkable new standalone fantasy *The Isle In The Silver Sea*, a book set in an alternate Britain where stories have supernatural power, this process of selection had come to preoccupy Tasha Suri. "What are the stories that we value as defining Britishness?" Suri says as she explains the kinds of questions she was asking. "And which are the stories that we cast aside? Why do we talk about dukes and ladies and never talk about molly houses, for example, when we talk about the Georgian era?"

In our current febrile moment, a time of nationalistic rhetoric, these questions seem especially acute, as Suri herself is only too aware. "I think there's a very strong movement in this country to want to love and value national identity," she says, "which is not something I'm inherently against, but often that love and valuing requires the erasure of things that were less pleasant about our national identity."

In contrast, *The Isle In The Silver Sea* is in great part a celebration of Britain in all its queer and diverse glory, a book of sapphic love that foregrounds "different diasporic cultures". It's a novel in which Suri gathers together familiar fairy tales, local folklore, Arthurian legend, Lindisfarne, knights, witches, magic ink, a monstrous monarch and fey folk before shaking these elements vigorously. Her fictionalised Britain is simultaneously both instantly familiar and strange, medieval yet also sitting outside time, anachronistic, so that you can suddenly find yourself in what seems to be a Victorian setting.

TELLIN' STORIES

Tying these wildly disparate elements together is the idea that stories have genuine power because, at some level, we *need* certain tales. "There are stories that we tell over and over again," Suri says, name-checking the star-crossed young lovers of *Romeo And Juliet*. "There's this huge element of me playing with who controls stories, who tells stories, who gets to decide which stories matter and how they are represented," she adds. The way Terry Pratchett span stories about stories, notably in *Witches Abroad* (1991), essentially a novel about the misuse and weaponisation of fairy tales, was an inspiration.

Not that Suri likely needed too much nudging to find her way to the theme of storytelling. "For most of my life, as far as I can remember, I wanted to write books," she says. As she grew up in Harrow, her Punjabi parents were supportive of her ambition. "People often joke all Indian parents just want you to be a doctor – and to be fair, if I had a kid, I'd want them to be a doctor, that's good money and security – but the view in my family wasn't quite the same," she says. Her father had worked as an actor and director, and saw writing as "a viable career".

Suri studied English and creative writing at the University of Warwick, an experience she seems to look back on with mixed feelings. "I think it can be very difficult to be in an environment that really values literary fiction and doesn't necessarily understand what you're doing," she says. "I had a lot of tutors and people I worked with who did [understand], but something knocked my confidence, for sure. When I left I really struggled to write."

BIODATA

From
Harrow, London

Greatest Hits
***The Jasmine Throne* (2021), the opening volume in the Burning Kingdoms trilogy, won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel. *Time* named 2018's *Empire Of Sand* as one of the best 100 fantasy books of all time.**

Random Fact
Toy dealers previously owned Suri's "mildly haunted" family home. When they moved they left behind items including "strange masks" and "slightly terrifying money banks that looked like anthropomorphic pigs".

BUILT ON SAND

A combination of "perfectionism" and "anxiety" meant she "couldn't hit the page at all". She became a medical secretary, and later a medical and scientific librarian. Along the way, she "wrote an entire novel by hand, because by hand felt safer and it didn't stress me out". She typed it up, only to discover the book was "really bad".

So she started anew, work that resulted in her debut *Empire Of Sand* (2018), a fantasy that drew on stories of Mughal India. The book took a while to be published – a situation not helped by Suri having no real understanding of how the industry worked, at least prior to finding an agent in the US who was "willing to take a chance" on her.

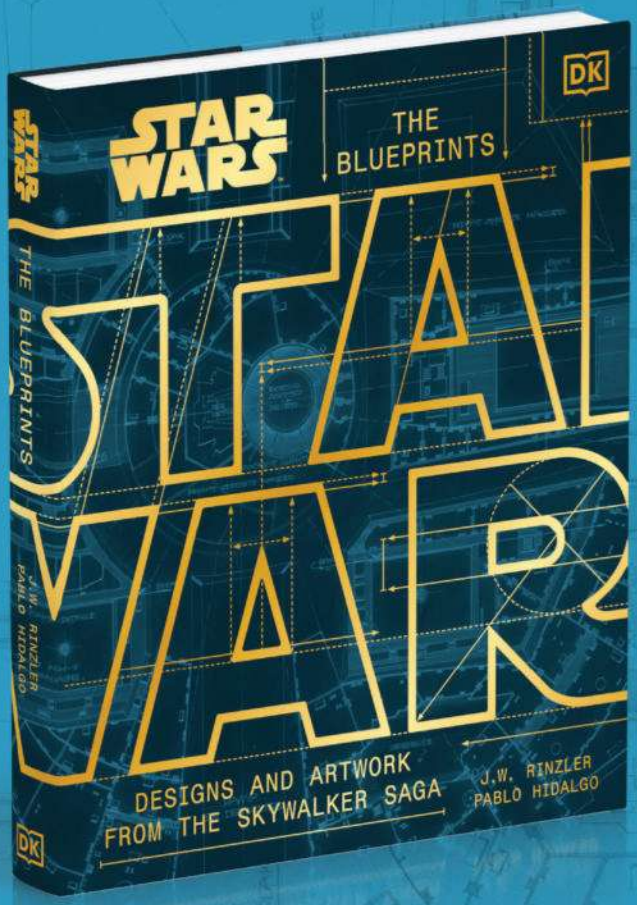
The book arrived at the right time, in that romantic fantasy stories playing out in non-European settings were suddenly in demand. SA Chakraborty's hugely successful *The City Of Brass*, for instance, had been published in 2017. "I often think there's a brain worm that gets shared among authors and we don't know," Suri jokes. "It just gets passed to each of us, and then about two years later we all come out with something similar."

She hasn't looked back since. She's written fantasy, a *Doctor Who* novel that plays out against a backdrop of the violent racism visited on the South Asian community in Southall in the '70s, and a YA reboot of *Wuthering Heights*. Throughout, her books have embraced difficult questions. To return to the notion of being British, she offers an optimistic vision, one rooted not just in excavating parts of history that some would rather leave undisturbed, but using this as a starting point, an aid to engaging with the world. "You have to make good decisions in order to make things better for yourself and others."

The Isle In The Silver Sea is out now, published by Orbit.

> "For most of my life, as far as I can remember, I wanted to write books"

THE SKYWALKER SAGA IN STUNNING DETAIL



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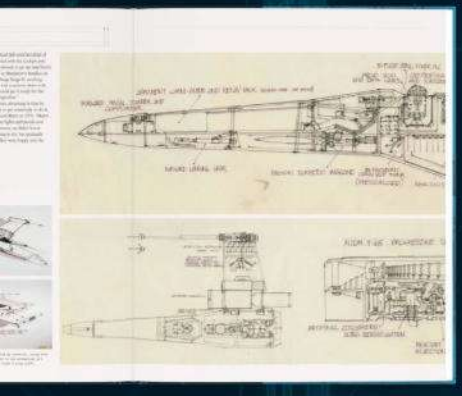

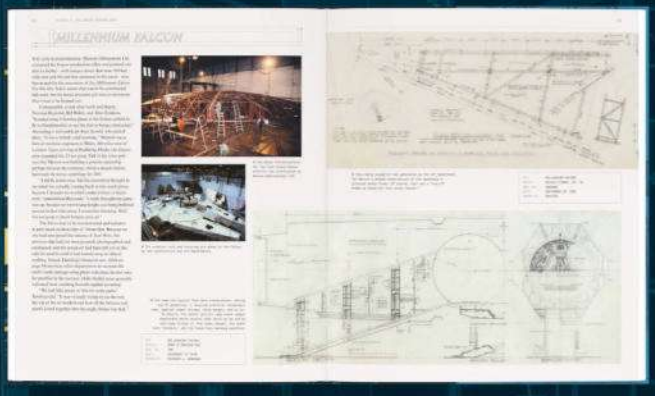

DK

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edited by Ian Berriman

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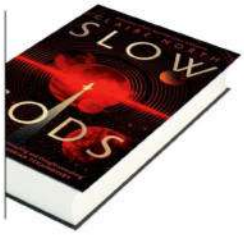

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SLOW GODS

→ Claire North's latest novel is an intergalactic tale of conspiracy, war and the fall of empires.

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Jared Leto, no doubt being annoyingly method.

TRON: ARES

Living off the Grid

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | **119 minutes**

Director **Joachim Rønning**

Cast **Jared Leto, Greta Lee, Evan Peters, Jodie Turner-Smith, Hasan Minhaj, Arturo Castro**

Surprisingly, there has been only one sequel since the original *Tron* brought then-cutting-edge CG technology to screens in 1982. But the film franchise has gathered a halo of fans who enjoyed the pulsing Daft Punk soundtrack and an updated version of the digital universe known as the Grid in *Tron: Legacy*.

Now, 15 years after *Legacy* comes *Tron: Ares*, boasting even more advanced filmmaking techniques but unfortunately also a shallow storyline.

We're reintroduced to the concept that continues a rivalry between tech giants Encom – the company Jeff Bridges's Kevin Flynn ran – and Dillinger Systems. The latter is now overseen by Julian Dillinger, played by Evan Peters, grandson of David Warner's long-dead Ed, and a scheming computer chip off the old block.

The current corporate arms race is transferring programs and objects from the Grid to the real world; Encom's Eve Kim wants to use the concept to help the world,

> **"Midway through the third act, everything grinds to a halt"**

while Dillinger is in it for military purposes. The Ares of the title is Jared Leto's program, summoned by Dillinger to do his bidding. But once he meets Eve and experiences more of humanity, he questions his destiny.

MacGuffin-wise, there's a lot of chatter about a "permanence code", which was invented by Flynn to keep programs stable in reality, and enough nostalgia for the first movie to fill a quantum hard drive.

Director Joachim Rønning certainly makes it all look stylish, with Light Cycles zooming through city streets and slicing police cars in half with their trails. Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, working alongside their Nine Inch Nails colleagues, contribute the booming score this time around.

Yet it's all in service of a slim plot that thinks it has dug up some big ideas about life (both digital and real) but mostly falls back on contrivance and cliché.

Leto is remarkably restrained, while Lee does the heavy lifting of bringing actual humanity to the film, helped by a winning comic relief turn from Arturo Castro. Peters is good as the Elon Musk-style villain, while Gillian Anderson does what she can with the seriously underwritten role of his mother Elisabeth, balancing icy efficiency with concerns about the ramifications of 3D-printing expendable super soldiers. Jodie Turner-Smith, meanwhile, is largely relegated to the role of loyal Ares sidekick, who goes predictably threatening when her boss heads into the real world.

It all rumbles along, building the stakes (including a giant Recognizer flying through a real-world city), until midway through the third act, when everything grinds to a halt for the biggest nostalgia trip of all, featuring an exposition dump courtesy of Bridges.

At this point, looking back rather than forward feels more like a bug than a feature of this franchise. **James White**

i Leto went method, asking everyone to refer to him as Ares on set. Jeff Bridges didn't stand for that nonsense!

THE THING WITH FEATHERS

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 21 NOVEMBER
TBC | 98 minutes
Director **Dylan Southern**
Cast **Benedict Cumberbatch, David Thewlis, Vinette Robinson, Sam Spruell**

Adapted from Max Porter's 2015 book *Grief Is The Thing With Feathers*, this morose drama puts an elevated horror spin on a story of family bereavement.

Benedict Cumberbatch stars as Dad, who's struggling to keep life moving forward as normal for his two boys after the death of his wife. Dad's an illustrator, and seemingly springing from his scratchy coal sketches is the otherworldly Crow, a sweary tormentor voiced by David Thewlis.

Documentary maker Dylan Southern makes his fiction feature debut here with no shortage of atmosphere and a couple of impressive flourishes. The boxy aspect ratio adds to the claustrophobic tone, and there's a striking sequence where Dad's tormented by "The Demon". It's impossible to fault Cumberbatch's commitment, even if he never entirely makes you forget this is a performance, a feeling compounded by the fact that he has to do things that people only ever do in movies, like dancing around the living room with wild abandon.

And while Crow benefits from Thewlis's acid tongue, the ropey creature effects feel hand-hewn to a fault. Overall, this is an experience that drags you through misery without rewarding you with something truly heartbreaking or profound. **Matt Maytum**

"Yep, it's definitely Emma Stone."

BUGONIA

Alien vs Redditor

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 118 minutes
Director **Yorgos Lanthimos**
Cast **Emma Stone, Jesse Plemons, Aidan Delbis, Alicia Silverstone**

A new Yorgos Lanthimos film always brings a mixture of anticipation and apprehension – will his particular style of darkly hewed satire translate this time (as with *Poor Things* and *The Favourite*), or will it get lost in the weeds of stylistic weirdness? Fortunately *Bugonia*, a remake of 2003 South Korean effort *Save The Green Planet!*, falls into the former category.

With *The Menu*'s Will Tracy adapting original writer/director Jang Joon-hwan's story of alien conspiracy theory, kidnapping and sweaty desperation, Lanthimos is able to mix the driving themes of climate chaos, unchecked capitalism and bee colony collapse with a funny, moody and emotionally satisfying farce that never ends up feeling like a lecture.

> **"A rare remake that finds new things to say"**

Jesse Plemons is Teddy, a lank-haired, twitchy, tortured conspiracy theorist convinced that extraterrestrials have been messing with the planet, and humans in particular. Aided by his sweet-natured autistic cousin Don (Aidan Delbis), he kidnaps pharma boss Michelle (Emma Stone, here making her fourth feature with the director).

What transpires is a comic battle of wills and a reckoning for the state of both the planet and humanity. Stone, who has found the ideal collaborator in the Greek filmmaker, pushes herself as always, her character's starkly shaved head and endlessly shifting tactics a welcome addition to their team-ups.

Yes, it's strange. Yes, it sometimes lags in terms of pace. But it's also one of the more accessible of Lanthimos's movies; a rare remake that actually finds new things to say rather than simply pumping out a carbon copy of the original. **James White**

i The movie's title refers to an ancient Mediterranean belief that bees generate from the carcasses of dead animals.

BLACK PHONE 2

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
18 | 114 minutes
Director **Scott Derrickson**
Cast **Ethan Hawke, Mason Thames, Madeleine McGraw, Jeremy Davies**

Ethan Hawke's mask-wearing child snatcher returns from the grave as a vengeful Freddy Krueger type in a sequel to Scott Derrickson's 2021 thriller that struggles to build on the original's strong foundations.

Moving the action from the killer's basement to a snowed-in youth camp, *Black Phone 2* also shifts the emphasis from the first film's teen hero Finn (Mason Thames) to his clairvoyant sibling Gwen (Madeleine McGraw). Despite retaining most of its predecessor's core ingredients, though, this seems more like an unnecessary extrapolation than a logical next chapter.

Four years after his escape from The Grabber's clutches, Finn is still tormented by his near-death experience. Yet it's Gwen who has the most trouble sleeping, plagued as she is by nocturnal visitations from three of the serial killer's earlier victims. Following their trail to the remote Alpine Lake, Gwen finds the murderer her brother killed last time out has lost none of his power in the afterlife. He also turns out to be a mean skater, a skill that features in a frenzied icebound set-piece that feels light years away from *The Black Phone*'s taut and lean economy.

It's not just the definite article that's gone missing in a follow-up that would have done well to heed its superior forerunner's "less is more" mindset. **Neil Smith**

PRIMITIVE WAR

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 28 NOVEMBER

TBC | 133 minutes

Director **Luke Sparke**

Cast **Ryan Kwanten, Tricia Helfer, Nick Wechsler, Jeremy Piven**

If you felt *Jurassic Park* skimped on jungle warfare and *Platoon* came up short in the dinosaur department, *Primitive War* could be the film for you. Writer/director Luke Sparke's high-concept actioner (based on Ethan Pettus's self-published novel) brings prehistoric creatures to 1968 Vietnam, and the results of this unlikely DNA-splicing are surprisingly successful... up to a point.

The film understands its source genres well enough to be both a fairly decent dinosaur movie, and a fairly decent Vietnam movie. But it overplays the homage card, with many of its choices feeling a little too obvious, from the familiar selection of prehistoric creatures on the rampage (T. rex, Raptors, Triceratops), to the clichéd use of Creedence Clearwater Revival songs on the soundtrack.

A subplot about dubious Soviet experiments also feels tacked on, and very *Stranger Things*. Even so, Sparke doesn't let a minuscule budget – reportedly less than $10 million – limit his ambition. Yes, the CG dinos sometimes look like they needed an extra render pass, but they're also plentiful and suitably dangerous.

The cast, meanwhile – led by *True Blood*'s Ryan Kwanten and *Battlestar Galactica*'s Tricia Helfer – have a decent stab at following in the footsteps of Arnie and his doomed comrades in *Predator*.

Richard Edwards

ALPHA

Death by stoning

★★★★☆

RELEASED 14 NOVEMBER

18 | 128 minutes

Director **Julia Ducournau**

Cast **Tahar Rahim, Golshifteh Farahani, Mélissa Boros, Emma Mackey**

After the punk rock madness of *Titane* and the rotting flesh of *Raw*, Palme d'Or-winning director Julia Ducournau turns inward, crafting a feverish coming-of-age tale that mutates into something cold and tragic: a fable about infection, fear and the limits of love.

After rebellious 13-year-old Alpha (Mélissa Boros) returns home with a bleeding tattoo, her mother (Golshifteh Farahani), a doctor who is brittle but loving, suspects the mark links to a spreading bloodborne illness that slowly turns its victims to stone, and has already claimed her drug-addicted brother Amin (Tahar Rahim).

It's an unspeakably cruel proposition, a literalisation of paralysis, guilt and shame, and Ducournau showcases her knack for both tenderness and terror.

> **"Boros gives a breakout performance"**

There's plenty of her trademark body horror: cracking skin, shifting flesh, the kind of imagery that makes you squirm yet you can't look away from. But what's striking is how quiet the film often is. Ducournau's camera lingers not just on wounds but on faces, particularly that of the terrified protagonist. Boros gives a breakout performance, further solidifying Ducournau's reputation as a master of female protagonists.

The AIDS-era metaphor isn't exactly subtle, and the pacing occasionally drifts, but *Alpha* earns its intensity and doesn't shy away from the repulsive, truly gnarly possibilities of the premise.

While Ducournau's work remains not for the fainthearted, it's haunting and deeply compassionate. *Alpha* is less about shock value than a dissection of the fear of loss of bodily control that has run throughout the director's work.

Leila Latif

i As part of his preparation, Tahar Rahim volunteered with an organisation that helps people struggling with drugs.

IT DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER THAN THIS

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 83 minutes

Directors **Rachel Kempf, Nick Toti**

Cast **Rachel Kempf, Nick Toti, Christian, Brent Cook**

"I wish I'd never filmed any of it, but I did. So now I'm finishing it, because what else am I going to do?" asks filmmaker Nick, in what might be the best explanation any character has ever offered for continuing to make their found footage horror movie long after they should've turned the camera off and run.

Nick and his partner Rachel are horror nerds, and they're obsessed with making their own short films. When they buy a dilapidated house to film in, they're delighted to find that it's got pentagrams scrawled all over the walls, and downright gleeful when they find an altar in the attic. But there's something weird going on with their neighbours, and holding a séance in the house probably wasn't a good idea...

There's plenty to get your teeth into, in terms of the characters' relationships with cameras and filming, and with horror and irony... but it's also a film in which nothing much really happens. Much like *The Blair Witch Project*, it's about some very normal (and occasionally annoying) people who stumble onto something evil, but never quite manage to find out what it is. The final reel is properly spooky, but the deliberate ambiguity of the plot will irritate as many people as it terrifies. **Sarah Dobbs**

GOOD FORTUNE

Trading Places

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 97 minutes

Directors **Aziz Ansari**

Cast **Seth Rogen, Aziz Ansari, Keanu Reeves, Keke Palmer**

Being an angel may give you wings, but not job satisfaction. That's the case at least with Gabriel (Keanu Reeves) in Aziz Ansari's fantastical LA comedy, a heavenly messenger who thinks there should be more to (the after) life than stopping drivers having texting-related accidents.

A chance to stretch himself arrives in the form of Arj (Ansari), a wannabe filmmaker trapped in gig economy drudgery. However, when Gabriel arranges for him to trade places with wealthy entrepreneur Jeff (Seth Rogen), his *It's A Wonderful Life*-style scheme backfires the moment Arj realises how much more wonderful life is in Jeff's shoes, home and personal sauna.

A Capra-esque fable laced with 21st century cynicism, *Good Fortune* has fun toying with the farcical potential of its *Freaky Friday* scenario. It's also blessed by a terrific turn from Reeves that only gets better when he's stripped of his powers by his seraphic boss Martha (Sandra Oh) and is obliged to earn his keep as a lowly dishwasher.

At some point, though, Ansari felt the need to make a statement on the inequities of capitalism and the indignities of wage slavery. Ken Loach he is not, alas, and the latter stages of *Good Fortune* founder on its creator's good intentions. **Neil Smith**

i Keanu Reeves broke his kneecap two weeks into production, tripping on a rug, but kept filming despite being on crutches.

Been touched by an angel? Support is available.

THE RED MARSH KING
The Extraordinary Last Days of Jake Miller
Book One
IAN HEDLEY
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kindleunlimited
★★★★★ 'Not just another teen horror story ...'
THE RED MARSH KING
THE EXTRAORDINARY LAST DAYS OF JAKE MILLER
BOOK 1
IAN HEDLEY
kindle
THE RED MARSH KING
IAN HEDLEY
A Dark Urban Fantasy only for the most courageous of souls

PEACEMAKER Season Two

Love and gore

★★★★☆

- UK **Sky Max/NOW, streaming now**
- US **HBO Max, streaming now**
- Creator **James Gunn**
- Cast **John Cena, Jennifer Holland, Danielle Brooks, Freddie Stroma, Steve Agee, Frank Grillo**

EPISODES 2.01-2.08 **The clue is in the** opening credits, which see returning choreographer Charissa Barton retaining many of the same moves that saw season one's musical number go viral, but this time with more characters and complexity. In place of Wig Wam's hard rock anthem "Do Ya Wanna Taste It" is Foxy Shazam's "Oh Lord", whose lyrics see a parent offer affection and wisdom to a child, while at the centre of the jiving are Chris "Peacemaker" Smith (John Cena) and Emilia Harcourt (Jennifer Holland).

Season two of *Peacemaker*, again written by DCU head honcho James Gunn, builds on the ace debut run by going deeper, its eight episodes dedicated to digging into Chris's traumatic childhood and tentatively developing his will-they-won't-they relationship with the even-more-damaged Harcourt. If all that sounds a bit worthy, do not fear – the show remains an orgy of profanity, violence and hair-metal needle drops. The key word here is orgy, given that the first episode features Chris hosting a wall-to-wall bonkathon.

Events kick off a month after Gunn's *Superman* movie, with everyone in a pretty bad place despite defeating those pesky alien butterflies in season one. Peacemaker is being closely surveilled by ARGUS director Rick Flag (Frank Grillo), who's still pissed that Chris killed his son, Rick Flag Jr (Joel Kinnaman) in *The Suicide Squad*; Economos (Steve Agee) is being forced to do the surveilling; Harcourt is persona non grata in the intelligence community; the marriage of Adebayo (Danielle Brooks) has fallen apart, and Adrian, aka Vigilante (Freddie Stroma), is obsessed with owls.

> **"Builds on the ace debut run by going deeper"**

He just couldn't be bothered to get up and turn the light on.

Then Chris discovers a quantum gateway to multiple universes, in one of which his alternate self is living contentedly with his brother Keith (David Denman), who's not dead, and dad Auggie (Robert Patrick), who's not a Nazi. Would he not be better off here? There's even a space for him after he accidentally kills other-Chris...

Peacemaker season two isn't perfect, struggling to keep all the balls in the air as it juggles characters, dimensions and storylines. Credibility drops as it turns Flag into an outright villain who happily sacrifices his own agents and teams up with Nicholas Hoult's cameoing Lex Luthor to further his anti-metahuman agenda. And some will sigh at how much of the climactic episode is committed to setting up future DC projects *Man Of Tomorrow* and *Creature Commandos* season two.

But boy, does this show continue to be a blast, by turns outrageous and open-hearted. At its best, it soars like Eagly, and the central love story is as warm and welcome as a hug from everyone's favourite feathered sidekick. Gunn has warned that a third season isn't imminent. We can only hope that an alt-Gunn is penning it right now and will gift it to our dimension. **Jamie Graham**

i During the season finale, look carefully during the concert on the boat and you can see James Gunn in the background.

LAZARUS

★★★☆☆

- UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**
- Showrunner **Danny Brocklehurst**
- Cast **Sam Claflin, Alexandra Roach, Bill Nighy, David Fynn**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Unlike** previous Harlan Coben TV shows, *Lazarus* is based on an original storyline from the prolific crime author, rather than being an adaptation. It also sees him delving into the supernatural for the first time.

In a clunky piece of nominative determinism, the show's shouty, judgemental protagonist, Joel Lazarus, aka "Laz" (Sam Claflin), is a therapist who sees dead people. After Laz's psychotherapist dad (Bill Nighy) apparently kills himself in his consulting room, Laz is visited by the ghost of Dr Lazarus Sr, who claims to have been murdered.

But, as is par for the course, even a ghost as loquacious as Laz's Dad won't actually reveal who the murderer is. Where would the fun be in that? Instead, Laz Jr is visited by a series of dad's dead patients, who provide him with clues to solve the mystery.

It's six stylish episodes of overwrought melodrama, thick with edgy atmosphere, crumbling characters and moments of black humour. But as the mystery unravels, and the levels of convoluted scriptwriting chicanery necessary to make sense of the backstory become clear, the series puts a titanic strain on your suspension of belief. You can't help wondering if the story might have benefitted from ejecting the whole supernatural element entirely. **Dave Golder**

GEN V Season Two

Back to superschool

★★★★☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**

Showrunner **Michele Fazekas**

Cast **Jaz Sinclair, Lizze Broadway, Maddie Phillips, Hamish Linklater**

EPISODES 2.01-2.08 **The first thing** you see in season two of *Gen V* is a caption reading "For Chance". The season that follows delivers a truly tasteful and touching tribute to a lost co-star, which is especially impressive in a franchise rarely associated with "tasteful". Hell, this year we have quantum anuses shitting out clone slaves and prehensile pubic hair.

Chance Perdomo tragically passed away between seasons, but his character's legacy looms large. Now in its sophomore year, the show about teen superheroes training in a Vought-sponsored academy genuinely feels like it adds to *The Boys*' universe rather than just operating as a spin-off. It dovetails with its progenitor, building on the Homelander-orchestrated state of terror the US was left in at the end of *The Boys* season four, and paving the way for season five.

The story reboots with the now-rogue Starlight urging Marie and her mates to return to Godolkin University to uncover the truth behind a secret project called Odessa. They reluctantly agree, and the creepy new Principal, Cipher, immediately takes Marie under his wing. He thinks she has the capability to become the greatest supe ever,

> **"Season two is a hell of a lot of subversive, satirical fun"**

The game of British bulldog was getting pretty full-on.

and has his own agenda planned for her.

The problem with pointing out how powerful Marie's blood-controlling powers are is that later in the season – once she's trained up – you wonder why she stands around not doing much in most fight scenes, rather than reducing everybody to icky puddles. That quibble aside, *Gen V* season two is a hell of a lot of subversive, satirical fun, with a stand-out performance from *Midnight Mass*' Hamish Linklater as Cipher. Then there's the show's own macabre twist on *High School Musical*; even the teen romance comes with a whole new dimension of perverse angst. *Gen V* is turning into a class act. **Dave Golder**

ℹ Project Odessa was first referenced in *The Boys*' episode "Wisdom Of The Ages", when Homelander visited the lab.

REVIVAL Season One

Diminishing returns

★★½☆☆

UK **Sky Max, Sundays/NOW, streaming now**

US **Syfy, finished airing**

Creators **Aaron B Koontz, Luke Boyce**

Cast **Melanie Scrofano, David James Elliott, Romy Weltman, Andy McQueen**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **Zombie, or not** zombie? That is the question. Just because you've returned from the grave, it doesn't mean you're a brainless walking infestation. You could remain a functioning member of society, yet still be the target of cadaverophobia.

That's the central conceit of the Syfy-produced, comic-inspired *Revival*, in which the dead start resurrecting in the small, rural town of Wausau, Wisconsin. Apart from the fact that they heal like Wolverine, they're pretty much normal and just want to get back to their old lives. But some people in town, including the local sheriff, straight-up don't trust them not to go all *Dawn Of The Dead*, and the State authorities put the town under quarantine.

It sounds like it could be an edgy, contemporary thriller, perhaps with some biting social commentary thrown in. But the darkly comic opening moments, with a flaming corpse emerging from its own cremation, suggest more of a *Zombieland*-style absurdist comedy with OTT gore. Sadly, although there are elements of both across these 10 episodes, the series' overwhelming aesthetic is soundly "Syfy" – you know, that kind of blandly functional, highly derivative, undemanding but sporadically inspired episodic telefantasy the channel's been churning out for years.

It has some fun playing with the rules of its setup, featuring almost-interesting characters and some deadpan humour ("You just can't die and not tell me!"). And there's one central performance that involves the actress going on an impressive journey from Ally Sheedy in *The Breakfast Club* to Linda Hamilton in *T2*.

But the overarching mystery plot plods listlessly, even failing to spark into life when a religious cult welcomes some angelic aliens into the proceedings (we kid you not). *Revival* is watchable fluff, but you'd be better off seeking out the similarly-themed but eerier *The Returned* (either the US remake or the original French version).

Dave Golder

She didn't notice the butler creeping up behind her.

ℹ The comic book *Hack/Slash* is referenced a couple of times. It was also written by *Revival* scribe Tim Seeley.

FRANKENSTEIN

Creature feature

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | SVOD

Director **Guillermo del Toro**

Cast **Oscar Isaac, Jacob Elordi, Mia Goth, Christoph Waltz**

NETFLIX **Mary Shelley's classic** 1818 novel and its indelible monster have been a constant source of inspiration for filmmakers. Guillermo del Toro's passion project uses the skeleton of the book and stuffs it with his own heart and brains. It's grand and often beautiful, with every department clearly working with the utmost care, though the result is something to admire rather than love.

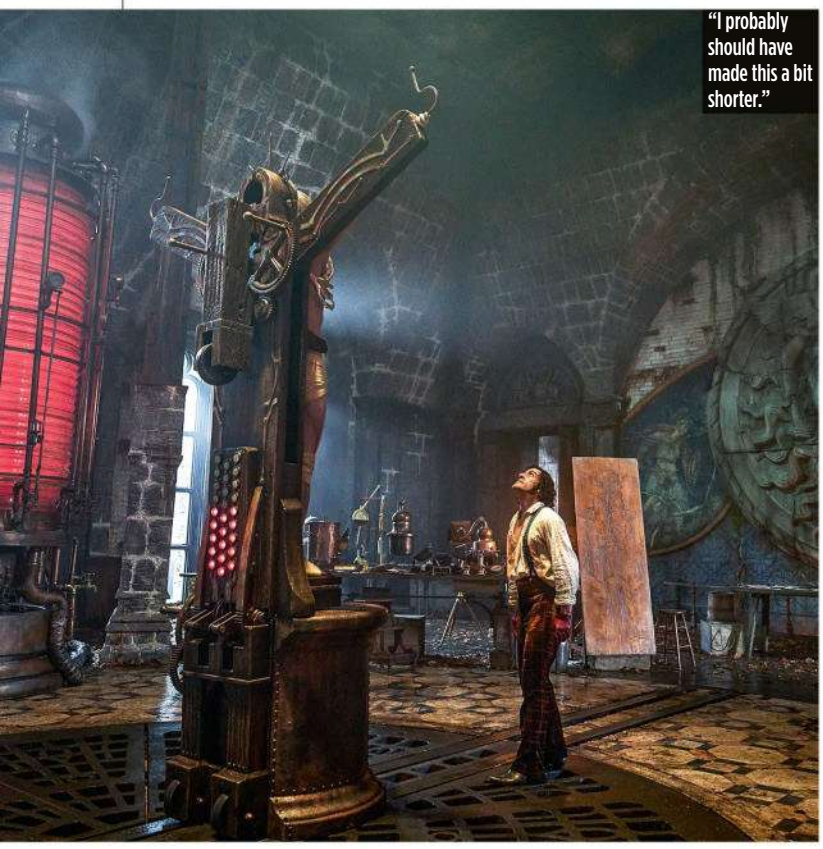
Del Toro's fingerprints are most visible in the revisions that make the Creature (Jacob Elordi) even more sympathetic and the scientist more monstrous, though father figure Victor Frankenstein (Oscar Isaac) stops well short of being a villain. The dual protagonists both get their say in the novel; so do they in this (long) film. An opening Prelude in "Furthermost North" in 1857 provides the frame from which Victor and his pursuing creation tell their stories.

"Part I" is the more successful portion of the film. The gothic production design of Victor's world is ravishing, from the muck-caked streets where he procures his raw materials to the isolated tower where he conducts his grand experiment (complete with grotesque Medusa reliefs).

Isaac, playing against type, is just the right level of hammy. For all the maximalist style, *Frankenstein* is surprisingly funny, from a playful confession scene to the almost comical grue Victor wrestles with; in an early demonstration of his hypothesis, he reanimates half a body to an anatomical theatre full of scandalised peers.

The soulful creature, kept chained in the basement, is initially like a toddler – albeit a seven-foot-tall toddler with superstrength and regenerative abilities. With his shaved head, pale skin and chiselled torso, he looks like a patchwork version of one of *Prometheus*' Engineers.

His powers can at times feel at odds with the period setting and the classicism of the filmmaking, like he's a hunky, misunderstood superhero out of time. That's not to fault Elordi's impressive performance; he emotes effectively under Jordan Samuel's terrific make-up effects, and embodies the Creature's otherworldly physicality. In this version, there's a hint of a romantic connection between the Creature and Victor's fiancée Elizabeth (Mia Goth), bringing echoes of del Toro's inter-species romance in *The Shape Of Water*.



"I probably should have made this a bit shorter."

> **Oscar Isaac is just the right level of hammy**

But for all the craft on show, the film doesn't really connect in its biggest emotional moments. The interlude with the Blind Man (David Bradley) is curiously underpowered compared to previous versions, and even the director's insightful father/son dynamic for Victor and the Creature feels more intriguing than impactful.

As enjoyable as it is to surrender to the artistry, it's not a truly definitive adaptation, and isn't as revelatory as the best recent spins such as *Poor Things*. **Matt Maytum**

i The exhibition *Frankenstein*: Crafting A Tale Eternal is on at London's Old Selfridges Hotel until 9 November.

CHAIN REACTIONS

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 18 | Blu-ray/digital

Director **Alexandre O Philippe**

Another year, another doc by Alexandre O Philippe, who's previously delved into topics such as *Psycho*, *Alien* and *The Exorcist*. The subject here: *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. No point going over how it was made again, right? Philippe seems to agree. Instead, he has five admirers of Tobe Hooper's gruelling 1974 horror offer appreciations, one by one.

Impressively, four are big names: comedian Patton Oswalt, directors Karyn Kusama and Takashi Miike, and Stephen King. Avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage is namechecked twice, which speaks volumes; no one here is yukking, *Beavis & Butthead* style, over the kills.

Oswalt's pet theory is that the violence is being replicated globally, due to a diseased sun (nonsense). Miiike reckons that if he hadn't seen the film he'd never have become a director. King praises how it doesn't sanitise violence. For Kusama, its thesis is "America is a madness." And critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas gives an Aussie POV, explaining how her memories of it are bound up with depictions of the outback.

There's no blinding flash of insight. And while there's more to it than talking heads – like neat clips of visual rhymes with other films – the overall effect is like watching a set of video essays. But the enthusiasm is infectious; you'll come away ready to revisit chez Sawyer.

Extras Commentary by Philippe; a chat between the director and Heller-Nicholas. **Ian Berriman**

ALTERED STATES

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1980 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Ken Russell**

Cast **William Hurt, Blair Brown, Bob Balaban, Charles Haid**

Essentially *Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde* if it'd been written by Carlos Castenada, Ken Russell's characteristically unrestrained take on a script by *Network*'s Paddy Chayefsky is a bracing mix of acid trip visuals and hoary old tropes.

William Hurt seems slightly miscast (insufficiently beardy weirdy) as a Harvard professor obsessed with combining hallucinogenic mushrooms acquired from a Mexican tribe and sensory deprivation. This eventually causes him to regress to an earlier stage of human evolution.

When said hairy apeman escapes to scamper round the streets, you may get the giggles. And it's disappointing that, after kicking open the doors of perception, the film slams them shut again for a cornball "Love is what really matters" ending. The hallucinatory sequences are the main draw, especially a fabulously far out one featuring a seven-eyed, goat-headed Christ on the cross.

Extras This dual-format Criteron Collection release has two new bonuses. Bran Ferren (26 minutes) explains how he employed the lighting skills previously used for the likes of Emerson, Lake and Palmer – it can get a bit technical. And film historian Samm Deigham's commentary is well-prepared.

Russell is on good form in a 1980 edition of *The Paul Ryan Show* (26 minutes). Plus: six minutes of a 2009 Q&A with Hurt; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

"Turn left at the necks junction... I mean *next*."

DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS

Aristocratic scaring

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1971 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Harry Kümel**

Cast **Delphine Seyrig, John Karlen, Danielle Ouimet, Andrea Rau**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Set against the** chilly backdrop of a seaside resort in winter, *Daughters Of Darkness* blends blood-lapping horror and blood–stirring eroticism.

Checking into a deserted hotel in Ostend, newlyweds Stefan and Valerie draw the attention of another guest, who claims to be a descendant of Elizabeth Báthory – infamous for bathing in the blood of virgins – but is clearly the undying Countess herself.

Delphine Seyrig is all languid grace and teasing menace in the role, resplendent in gowns worthy of Marlene Dietrich in her pomp. Future *Cagney & Lacey* star John Karlen brings simmering intensity to Stefan, as his sadistic impulses surface. And Andrea Rau is radiantly beautiful as the consort the Countess is seeking to replace.

With its moments of repressed desire erupting into perversity, and gorgeous score blending melancholy waltz and sampleable breakbeats, it's exploitation done with impeccable arthouse style.

Extras A discussion between Kümel and critic Anne Billson (31 minutes) is a chat between pals, with an unstructured feel. Kat Ellinger's visual essay (25 minutes) covers other films that draw on the Báthory legend. Kim Newman's talking head (28 minutes) is rather a ramble. Film scholars Virginie Sélavy and Lindsay Hallam's commentary is the improvised sort that responds to what's on-screen.

Two Belgian TV reports from the set (three/10 minutes) observe a car stunt, and interview Kümel. A 1989 French TV chat with Seyrig (27 minutes) relates to a female-focused festival, not this film. Plus: two of Kümel's youthful shorts (five/seven minutes); an 80-page booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Kümel wanted a Czech-made Tartraplan for the Countess' car but, unable to source one, switched to a British Bristol 403.

THE AMBULANCE

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1990 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Larry Cohen**

Cast **Eric Roberts, James Earl Jones, Megan Gallagher**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The prolific** maverick Larry Cohen was a master of the high-concept pitch, and this one's worthy of an urban myth: what if the ambulance picking people up is abducting them for medical experiments? Eric Roberts is a comic artist caught in a mystery when the woman he's hitting on collapses, then disappears.

Part Hitchcockian thriller, part *Coma*, it also ticks comedy, romance and horror. Despite the titular vehicle's sinister green-lit interior, and a mad scientist villain, the latter takes up a smaller pie-chart slice than you'd expect. The most horrific thing here is Roberts's mullet.

Scenes set in an ersatz Marvel bullpen add interest for genre fans – keep 'em peeled for the likes of artist Gene Colan. And the typically quirky Cohen-ian characterisation entertains, with Red Buttons, as a wise-cracking old-timer reporter, hugely endearing.

Extras This Eureka! release has three new features. There's an excellent talking head by Michael Doyle (22 minutes), who gleaned insights while wrote a book on Cohen. A video essay (16 minutes) places the film in the context of medical horror. The director of doc *King Cohen* provides commentary. He also moderated the archival track by the late Cohen, who's full of anecdotes. Some of those are replicated in a 2017 interview with the director/his stunt coordinator (20 minutes). Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

DEAD OF NIGHT

SFX Loves

Oh! What's recurrin'?

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1945 | 12 | 4K & Blu-ray

Directors **Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Robert Hamer, Basil Dearden**

Cast **Mervyn Johns, Googie Withers, Michael Redgrave, Sally Ann Howes**

Ealing's touchstone of British horror celebrates its 80th with a sumptuous new 4K restoration.

A series of uncanny tales are related by the guests in a country cottage, all of whom seem to have stepped from the recurrent nightmares of architect Mervyn Johns. No less than four directors create a remarkably consistent piece of fireside entertainment; one that juggles tone, but retains an inimitable style.

A disquieting story of a deadly premonition is followed by a slighter tale of a child ghost. Then it's an inventive yarn about a cursed mirror and a mischievous account of a spectral golfer that showcases beloved comic duffers Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne. The final entry is the strongest, fully embracing the macabre as Michael Redgrave's tormented ventriloquist confronts his own diabolical dummy.

Told in luminous monochrome, wearing the influence of Expressionist cinema in its shadows and angles, this is a film that knows how to dream.

Extras *Prevenge*'s Alice Lowe offers some fascinating readings of the movie, and reveals its influence on her own work (36 minutes). Film historian Nathalie Morris takes an informed look at Ealing's glorious posters (22 minutes), while author John Llewellyn-Probert traces *Dead Of Night*'s literary antecedents and explores portmanteau horror (41 minutes). Elsewhere, David Huckvale dissects the score in forensic detail (48 minutes), and critic Pamela Hutchinson provides an audio commentary. Also included: the *Remembering Dead Of Night* retrospective from the DVD release (76 minutes); a modest picture gallery. This dual-format Studiocanal release is packaged with two mini-posters and a 64-page booklet.

Nick Setchfield

> **A remarkably consistent piece of fireside entertainment**

Dead Of Night was lit by Douglas Slocombe, later the cinematographer of the *Indiana Jones* films.

THE HOUSE AT HALLOW END

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

2025 | 15 | Digital

You'd be forgiven for thinking you'd got this movie's number. Following an accident, a new mother moves into a creepy old house, then becomes convinced there's a monster that wants to eat her baby. We know how this one goes.

Except, somehow, it doesn't. Writer/director Angela Gulner is careful about every detail of her storytelling, from her dialogue down to her characters' socks, and so the final reel is startling, smart and surprisingly tender. **Sarah Dobbs**

A MOTHER'S EMBRACE

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **10 NOVEMBER**

2024 | 15 | Digital

For a very simple story, this Brazilian monster horror throws an awful lot of facts and figures at you.

Something happens in 1973, then 1997; there are stats on rainfall in Rio de Janeiro; and some convoluted business about a firefighter appealing to move back to active duty after a breakdown. All that just to do a haunted house movie about childhood trauma.

It's atmospheric enough, but could have used a brutal pass by a script editor. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE DRAFT!

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

2025 |15 | Digital

The spirit of *The Cabin In The Woods* is revisited in this entertaining postmodern horror-comedy from Indonesia. Five college students head into the sticks for a break, only to realise that they're literally inside a horror movie, subject to the whims of a writer still figuring things out on the page.

There's a bit too much exposition, but strong central performances and a premise that's more *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* than *Scream* make for a charming and likeable film.

Will Salmon

STRANGE HARVEST

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

2025 | 18 | Digital

Someone tell the Bye Bye Man he's not the killer with the daftest name anymore. *Strange Harvest* is a true crime mockumentary about the exploits of... Mr Shiny.

What starts out as a fairly convincing pastiche soon falls apart, partly due to the absurdity of "Mr Shiny"'s crimes, but partly because the filmmakers keep trying to make a horror movie instead. The gore's effectively stomach-churning, but the story should be unnerving enough not to need the shock tactics – it's just been told wrong. **Sarah Dobbs**

DAIEI GOTHIC Volume Two

Once Nippon a time...

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1960/1969/1970 | 15 | Blu-ray

Directors **Tokuzō Tanaka, Kimiyoshi Yasuda**

Cast **Kojiro Hongo, Teruo Ishiyama, Kazuo Hasegawa**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Radiance's second** set of Japanese ghost stories once more showcases the classy craftsmanship of the Daiei studio. All three are period tales, which have their roots in old folktales.

Cat lovers should be amused by *The Haunted Castle* (1969). After a blind monk is killed in a rage by a samurai lord, his sister commits suicide, urging her moggy to lap up some blood. This transforms it into a vengeful spirit with demonic powers. Soon possessed women in the lord's court are spurning baths and swiping carp out of the pond to snack on – but, thankfully, not licking their bumholes. All this can get a little comical, and the fact that the villain *doesn't* get his just desserts is frustrating, but there's some exquisite use of lighting to render transformations – like a good conjuring trick.

Ghosts don't actually feature that much in *The Ghost Of Kasane Swamp* (1970), with more time given over to melodrama. Kicking off with a samurai murdering a blind money lender, it's a pretty gruelling catalogue of murder, rape, blackmail and betrayal which makes Edo-era Japan seem an extremely bleak place to have existed – especially for a woman. Pretty much every character is despicably venal. The amount of sex and violence suggests that Daiei – then a year away from going bankrupt – was adjusting to audience expectations in a not dissimilar way to Hammer in the UK. The feelbad vibes are slightly alleviated by a great score, which augments traditional instrumentation with fuzz guitar and theremin.

The Demon Of Mount Oe (1960) is the outlier here, a colourful historical epic with sumptuous costuming and battle scenes employing a vast cast of extras. The titular "demon" holed up in a mountain base is actually a fundamentally noble revolutionary, but there's no shortage of supernatural weirdness. Of the three films, it's the most likely to make Western viewers feel that a lack of cultural knowledge is hindering a fully rounded appreciation, but certain things – like a grotesque giant spider – transcend nationality when it comes to inspiring delight.

Extras Each film comes with a talking head, and quite rightly the interviewees are all Japanese. J-horror directors Mari Asato and Norio Tsuruta supply thoughtful personal appreciations of *Haunted Castle* (17 minutes) and *Kasane Swamp* (18 minutes). Meanwhile, period film expert Taichi Kasuga (19 minutes) explains how *Mount Oe* is a textbook example of the all-star blockbusters made for Japan's holiday period Golden Week.

Elsewhere, scholar Lindsay Nelson provides commentary on 25 minutes of selected scenes from *Kasane Swamp* (smart move – sometimes less is more), while writer Zack Davisson explores how the story has evolved across different mediums since it was set down in 1690 (12 minutes). MidnightEye.com's Tom Mes pops up twice, recounting a potted bio of *Haunted Castle* star Ikuko Mori (six minutes), and discussing a sword featured in *Mount Oe* (four minutes) – a real-life national treasure. Plus: trailers; 80-page booklet. **Ian Berriman**

Wait until you see what she's done to the flowerbeds.

The Haunted Castle star Ikuko Mori was arrested a week before release for stabbing her lover. She served three years in jail.

IN THE MOUTH OF MADNESS

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1994 | 15 | 4K

Director **John Carpenter**

Cast **Sam Neill, Julie Carmen, Jürgen Prochnow, David Warner**

This mystery about a missing author plays like a mash-up of Lovecraft and *The Twilight Zone*. Sam Neill is an insurance investigator tasked with locating Sutter Cane. The trail, impossibly, leads to Hobb's End, a town from Cane's novels. Are events detailed in his latest manuscript – like humanity transforming into monstrous form – becoming reality?

Featuring the odd physical effect worthy of *The Thing*, and a wryly metatextual ending, the film riffs on the moral panics around the malign influence of culture on consumers – which may explain why it's bookended by blasts of heavy metal. As Lovecraftian cinema goes, it's not up there with Stuart Gordon and Brian Yuzna's best, but it comes creditably close.

Extras Arrow's 4K-only release offers five new bonuses. Producer Sandy King (22 minutes) praises Neill's unassuming nature. Actor Jürgen Prochnow (seven minutes) says nothing of note. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's video essay (11 minutes) discusses themes like "haunted media". A 33-minute piece offers three more perspectives – take a swig whenever one guy says "metaphysics". The team from podcast *Colors Of The Dark* provide commentary.

Two old yack tracks are also carried over, as are five archival featurettes. Plus: trailers; poster; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

MARTYRS

The Agony And The Ecstacy

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2008 | 18 | 4K & Blu-ray

Director **Pascal Laugier**

Cast **Mylène Jampanoï, Morjana Alaoui, Catherine Bégin**

Pascal Laugier's infamous torture horror is a relentlessly nihilistic experience right from the very start. A young woman, Lucie, escapes from a year in captivity during which she has been subjected to torture. Cut to 15 years later, and the adult Lucie (Mylène Jampanoï) invades a seemingly normal family home seeking revenge, while also being haunted by visions of a demonic woman. When her friend Anna (Morjana Alaoui) gets involved, the situation quickly goes from bad to worse.

> **A film with some intriguing religious themes**

Martyrs is a smarter film than the likes of *Hostel*, with some intriguing religious themes and a degree of empathy for its doomed protagonists. Even so, there's no denying that it's a tough watch, with a whiff of misogyny in its brutal depictions of women being beaten and tormented in almost every scene.

Extras This Eureka! Masters of Cinema release comes with a mix of new and archive features. The highlight of the fresh material is an interview with star Mylène Jampanoï (17 minutes), who looks back on the film with pride.

There are two contributions from academics: a video essay by Alice Haylett Bryan discusses the movie and its place in both the horror and New French Extremity movement (25 minutes), while Xavier Aldana Reyes appraises the film as body horror (19 minutes). A commentary by festival programmer Nia Edwards-Behi offers a positive take on the film.

The previously released *Organic Chronicles* (86 minutes) is a feature-length making of documentary. There are also archival interviews with Laugier (19 minutes) and special effects make-up artist Benoît Lestang (14 minutes). Plus: trailers; gallery. This dual-format Limited Edition also comes with a 100-page booklet and a double-sided fold-out poster.

Will Salmon

The ketchup fight soon got out of hand.

i Pascal Laugier spent two months with Jampanoï and Alaoui, rehearsing the film and building trust.

SHORT SHARP SHOCKS Volume Four

Scare tactics

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1948-1980 | 18 | Blu-ray

Directors **Various**

Cast **Tony Vogel, Gabrielle Drake, Patrick Macnee, John Le Mesurier**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Another macabre** selection box of shorts, curated by the BFI. The main attraction is Roger Christian's haunting "Black Angel", the support feature to *The Empire Strikes Back*. It's a vividly realised medieval fantasy that anticipates the mist-and-armour aesthetic of *Excalibur*.

From the '40s come the intriguingly metatextual "The Fatal Night", notable for an early appearance by *The Avengers*' Patrick Macnee, and "Death In The Hand", a stagey, interminable tale of fate foretold. Two instalments of '50s anthology show *Strange Experiences* provide more black and white shudders – fairground chiller "The Laughing Clown" has a lingering weirdness. Amateur films "Night Ride" and "Mirror Mirror" may be ragged, but brim with striking imagery.

Once banned, 1976's 8mm fever dream "Sanctum" blends the sacred and the profane. The near-wordless "Scarecrow" (1972) offers a superb slice of rural horror, while "Red" (1976) serves up bare flesh and Grand Guignol.

Two Play Safe public information films complete the set, warning against the high-voltage perils of substations and power lines. The kid-frying horror of "Frisbee" delivers the ultimate short, sharp shock: "Jimmmmmy!"

Extras Roger Christian reveals a Kurosawa fixation as he discusses the making of "Black Angel" (21 minutes) while Mario Zampi Jr illuminates his dad, director of "The Fatal Night" (10 minutes). Elsewhere, "Night Ride"'s John Attfield remembers childhood friend and filmmaking prodigy Denis Meikle (17 minutes), and Astrid Frank recalls directing "Red" (18 minutes). Galleries include "Black Angel" storyboards and Frank's ephemera collection. There's also some charming behind-the-scenes footage from "Night Ride" (three minutes). Plus: a booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

"Black Angel" star Tony Vogel and his big chopper.

i As well as being a film producer and director, Mario Zampi also imported the first pizza oven into Britain.

THE TOWN THAT DREADED SUNDOWN

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1976 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Charles B Pierce**

Cast **Ben Johnson, Andrew Prine, Dawn Wells, Jimmy Clem**

88 Films is releasing this under its Slasher Classics Collection brand, which feels slightly misleading. Loosely based on killings around a town on the Texas/Arkansas border in 1946, its vibe is more true crime docu-drama – despite the killer's penchant for wearing a burlap sack (like Jason before he picked up a hockey mask).

That said, the sight of said sack moving in and out as he breathes is downright creepy. And one particularly grim murder scene – where the killer improvises a trombone into a weapon of torture – tips proceedings over the edge.

The attacks feel authentically chaotic. The period feel is well realised. Sporadic narration further bolsters the sense of verisimilitude. The one thing that lets down this otherwise gripping film is director Charle B Pierce's ill-advised decision to cast himself as a bumbling cop, whose feeble comic relief undercuts the tension.

Extras There are three new bonuses. Stephen Thrower (40 minutes) discusses both this film and Pierce's *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, usefully detailing fabrications (that trombone, for one!). Chatty commentaries pair critics Sean Hogan and Kim Newman/Dave Wain and Matty Budrewicz. However, the three cast/crew interviews and commentary by an expert on the crimes from Eureka!'s 2015 release are absent. **Ian Berriman**

People had to make do before Insta filters.

THE DIABOLICAL DR Z

A war of nerves

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1966 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Jess Franco**

Cast **Estella Blain, Mabel Karr, Howard Vernon, Fernando Montes**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Connoisseurs of** Euro sleaze will find much that's characteristic about this Jess Franco effort, a comic strip-y blend of gothic horror, SF and spy-fi. Typically, a surreal cabaret sequence is a highlight – in this case, a woman in a gauzy bodysuit seduces a mannequin on a spider's web. However, by the usual standards of the *Vampyros Lesbos* director, it's rather chaste.

The titular Dr Zimmer dies 13 minutes in. No, he didn't invent the frame, but located "the nerve centres that govern good and evil". The focus then shifts to his daughter, as she enacts vengeance on the neurologists who snubbed him – the curare-dipped nails of dancer Miss Death (enslaved by probing said nerves) her weapon.

As you may have gathered, the film has a cheery disdain for logic – something winked at when the police impossibly turn up at the end, and put it down to "intuition". But if you can swallow its many improbablities, it's a great deal of fun. It may also be Franco's most visually accomplished film, brimming with low angles and chiaroscuro shadows, and boasting several striking set-pieces.

Extras This Eureka! release includes both French and English options. Author Xavier Aldana Reyes (26 minutes) does a good job placing the film in the context of Spanish horror and Franco's oeuvre. Samm Deighan's video essay (19 minutes) offers a dry catalogue of mad-scientist movies.

Four more decent bonuses are sourced from 2018 releases. *Video Watchdog*'s Tim Lucas provides a well-prepped commentary. Writer Jean-Claude Carrière (18 minutes) supplies wry anecdotes, painting Franco as an "endearing" figure, but one who "became tiring very quickly". Lucas Balbo (16 minutes) addresses details like the mystery of a possible lost scene; Stéphane du Mesnildot's Franco-focused piece (11 minutes) compares him to "an improvising jazzman". Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Writer Jean-Claude Carrière worked with Luis Buñuel many times, and was Oscar-nominated for two of their collaborations.

(4K X FOUR)

OLD MOVIES NOW AVAILABLE ON UHD

If Guillermo del Toro's take on *Frankenstein* looks too strong for your stomach, you could always revisit Tim Burton's **EDWARD SCISSORHANDS** (3 November), which sees the titular innocent taken in by a suburban family. We said: "Satirical in a charming way, it ends up slightly too fey for its own good." Bonuses? Just two commentaries and an EPK piece from the Blu-ray. In Georges Franju's 1960 horror **EYES WITHOUT A FACE** (out now), a surgeon kidnaps young women, cutting their faces off to restore his disfigured daughter. We said: "For a film that hinges on surgical terror, it's extremely beautiful." The one major new bonus is a commentary by critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas. A second track, a Franju career overview, an actor interview and two shorts are retained from the 2015 BFI Blu-ray. The 50th anniversary celebrations continue with the release of **THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW** (out now). Richard O'Brien's musical love letter to old B-movies sees a couple taking refuge at a castle where alien transvestite Dr Frank-N-Furter holds court. We said: "It's fun. It's kitsch. It's got an energetic cast and a great selection of tunes." Extras include commentary, sing-along lyrics, and a deleted song – but nowt new. Finally, in Taiwan-set shocker **THE SADNESS** (out now), an infection turns people into grinning sadists who enact their worst imaginings. We said: "An Infected movie even the Marquis de Sade might have blanched at." Extras include five featurettes, three commentaries, two shorts, and a Q&A.

THREE/THREE... EXTREMES

Six of the East

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2002/2004 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Kim Jee-woon, Nonzee Nimibutr, Peter Ho-Sun Chan, Fruit Chan, Park Chan-wook, Takashi Miike**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Each featuring a** trio of tales, this pair of pan-Asian anthology films is a mixed bag.

Peter Ho-Sun Chan's "Going Home" is *Three*'s highlight, thanks to its mouldering apartment block setting and weird premise, as a man strives to resurrect his dead wife by bathing her corpse in Chinese herbs. *A Tale Of Two Sisters* director Kim Jee-woon's "Memories" renders a new town's clinicism eerie, but the solution to its memory-themed dual mystery is obvious from the outset. Thai filmmaker Nonzee Nimibutr's "The Wheel" is the weakest link: a dull tale of a possessed puppet, tiresomely overreliant on slow-mo.

Three... Extremes earns its title with Fruit Chan's "Dumplings". Its youth-maintaining morsels are filled with human foetus, sourced from hospitals. Further twists take the story in even more queasy directions. In *Oldboy* director Park Chan-wook's "Cut", an extra takes a director's wife hostage, resulting in a terrible choice – and jet-black comedy. Wonder if they saw, er, *Saw*? Takashi Miike's "Box" is the tamest: a Lynchian tale of a writer haunted by a circus childhood, it may send you scurrying, baffled, to check the IMDb synopsis.

She's going to pass grade seven piano if it kills her.

Extras A huge amount, but binge it all and you may zone out from the repetition. There are five new interviews (totalling 118 minutes) – one, with producer Peter Ho-Sun Chan, split into two parts. Fruit Chan's candour makes his the highlight, as he amusedly recalls how supporting actor Bai Ling made demands as if she was the star. We also hear from Miike, who felt liberated from the usual pressures (a recurring theme here), Kim Jee-woon, and his DoP.

Six archival interviews (116 minutes), stretching back two decades, include two more with the producer – you'll be sick of the sight of him! Plus: commentary by Miike on "Box"; four Making Ofs; trailers; booklet; poster. **Ian Berriman**

i Hideo Nakata was approached for *Three*, while Andrew Lau was initially lined-up for *Extremes*. Fruit Chan took his place.

NIGHT GALLERY

The dark art

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1969-1973 | 12 | Blu-ray

Producer **Jack Laird**

Cast **Joan Crawford, Leonard Nimoy, Vincent Price, Adam West**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **It's tempting to see** this '70s anthology show as the hairier, polyester-clad successor to *The Twilight Zone*. Leaning into the supernatural, with the occasional excursion into sci-fi, it finds *Zone* supremo Rod Serling introducing witching-hour tales in his familiar lyrical style, inspired by paintings that possess all the lurid energy of vintage horror paperback covers.

While Serling provides a third of the scripts – "They're Tearing Down Tim Riley's Bar" is an Emmy-nominated standout, a typically heartfelt examination of loss and longing – he's essentially a hired hand, with none of the creative control he enjoyed on *The Twilight Zone*. There's a clear clash between Serling's vision and producer Jack Laird's taste for cornball horror skits that feel like *Famous Monsters* gags come to life.

Still, it all looks terrific in high-def. Look out for "Eyes", the professional debut of 22-year-old Steven Spielberg, bringing a precocious talent to production-line television.

It's like someone fed Bob Ross after midnight.

Extras A three-part look at *Night Gallery*'s syndicated afterlife (180 minutes total) proves genuinely engrossing; presented with a wry touch by fan Craig Beam, it reveals how episodes were brazenly recut and remixed, incorporating everything from NASA stock footage to Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* while also cannibalising TV series *The Sixth Sense*. Side-by-side comparisons allow a detailed analysis of this "wanton savagery".

There is also a staggering number of new audio commentaries (we make it 57!) by assorted aficionados, plus the occasional contributor to the series. Two "lost" segments only seen in syndication – "Die Now, Pay Later" and "Room For One Less" – are included alongside "Witches' Feast", such a clunker it was replaced on repeat, and an extended cut of "Little Girl Lost".

Previously released items include yet more commentaries, a 2008 retrospective (30 minutes), and a featurette on Tom Wright's gloriously macabre paintings (three minutes), along with TV promo spots. **Nick Setchfield**

i Spielberg is credited as director on "Make Me Laugh", but his original single-take version so appalled execs it was reshot.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS

The Conjuring: Last Rites • *Freakier Friday* • *The Life Of Chuck* • *The Long Walk* • *The Strangers: Chapter 2*

THE ISLAND

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1985 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Po-Chih Leong**

Cast **John Sham, Hoi-Lun Au, Lung Chan, Jing Chen**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Anyone with an** interest in how US cinema had an influence overseas should get something from this Hong Kong horror. The way it pits rural folk against educated city-dwellers echoes the likes of *The Hills Have Eyes*.

A teacher takes six students on a trip to a deserted island – left alone until the boat returns in two days. Unfortunately, it's home to three deranged brothers, who are intent on adding one girl to their clan.

As is not uncommon with Hong Kong films of the period, certain elements may cause you to wince – not only is the snot-dribbling youngest brother clearly intellectually disabled, but one girl cracks, on seeing an earring, that he "must be gay"...

We know the brothers are bad news from the get-go, which makes the protracted wait for their behaviour to escalate frustrating. Things finally shift into top gear about an hour and 10 in, forcing John Sham's ineffectual hero to man up. Even here, though, the use of meat-slap sound effects adds some unintentional comedy.

Extras Asian cinema expert Tony Rayn runs through key points of interest (17 minutes). In a 2023 Q&A (23 minutes) the director recalls sleeping on straw during a tough shoot. Eureka! stalwart Frank Djeng's commentary is helpful on cultural context; Mike Leeder and Arne Venema's chatty team-up is equally fact-packed. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

THE BARBARIANS

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1987 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Ruggero Deodato**

Cast **The Barbarian Brothers, Richard Lynch, Eva LaRue, Michael Berryman**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The director of** *Cannibal Holocaust* was behind this silly fantasy adventure. Bodybuilding twins the Barbarian Brothers (real names Peter and David Paul) play a pair of, er, barbarian brothers imprisoned by an evil warlord. When they grow up, saving the land – and, more importantly, the circus troupe that raised them – is dependent on finding a magical ruby, *if* they can find time in-between severing limbs and showing off their impressive pecs.

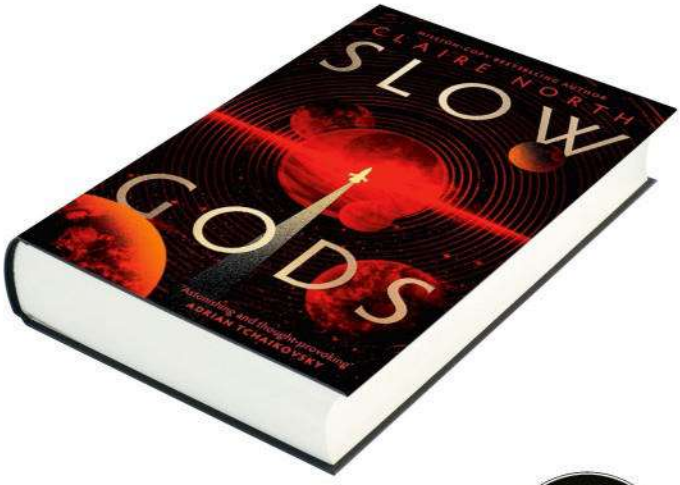
Although it's no classic, *The Barbarians* is at least entertaining. The two leads take knuckleheadedness to spectacular extremes, while the gore frequently borders on comical. The sets and effects are also, at times, endearingly low-budget.

Extras Two commentaries (one by film historians Troy Howarth and Eugenio Ercolani, the other *Empire* journos Kim Newman and Nick de Semlyen) dive into behind the scenes stories. A quartet of video essays (totalling 67 minutes) cover topics like the Barbarian Brothers and studio Cannon Films. There are five new interviews (111 minutes): the DoP, the editor, the first AD and a stuntman are quizzed; Ercolani also contributes.

Plus: a 2016 chat with Ruggero Deodato (13 minutes); two shorts by the first AD (30/13 minutes); trailer; TV ad; art cards. **Richard Edwards**

ROUND UP

There's a flood of recent theatrical releases hitting shiny disc. The second effort by the directors of *Talk To Me*, **BRING HER BACK** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) sees two orphaned siblings discovering there's something *very* wrong with their new foster brother. We said: "A sense of dread pervades every frame... an *Exorcist*-inspired flick with an evil, unfamiliar twist." Extras: directors' commentary, a Making Of (20 minutes), a deleted scene, and the ritual video seen in-film. Set on the alternate Earth-828 in 1964, retro-futuristic reboot **THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) tasks Marvel's first family with protecting their world from planet-devouring cosmic being Galactus. We said: "This is a fun world, one that makes a beleaguered movie empire feel new again." Bonus-wise, you get director/production designer commentary, three featurettes (32 minutes), five deleted scenes, and a gag reel. Like Kevin Williamson's 1997 version, **I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees a bunch of young folk being hunted down by a hook-wielding killer in a raincoat after a fatal car accident. We enjoyed one particular cameo by a star of the original, but said "otherwise this is a dud, due to a script which constantly stretches credulity beyond breaking point." Bonuses: two featurettes (20 minutes); deleted scenes; bloopers. Gareth Edwards introduces a new set of characters in **JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), as a pharma exec assembles a team to collect biomaterial from an R&D facility on an island in the Atlantic. We said: "Edwards admirably brings the series back to basics... As well as rediscovering the tension, he also finds a way to imbue it with a sense of wonder." A decent extras spread includes two commentaries by Edwards and various crew, a 56-minute Making Of, an alternate opening, two extended scenes, and a gag reel. The 4K offers four additional featurettes (24 minutes). A meditation on fractured families, **THE LEGEND OF OCHI** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) sees a teenage girl befriending a baby version of the titular critter – a cryptozoological cross between ape, bear and bat. Awkward, given that her father fanatically hunts them... We said: "A little slow at times, but has charm to spare and some top-notch practical puppet work." We're expecting the same extras from the US release: director's commentary, a set tour, and a deleted scene. James Gunn's **SUPERMAN** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) doesn't rehash the origin story, plunging us into a fully-formed world as Lex Luthor turns humanity against the Man of Steel. We said "A witty, breezily entertaining watch... Gunn places a beating heart behind that famous chest symbol." A good bonus offering includes director's commentary, a 59-minute Making Of, eight featurettes (40 minutes), an animated Krypto short, deleted scenes and gags. Finally, the mystery of why 17 schoolkids all woke at 2.17am and ran off into the night is central to **WEAPONS** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD). We said: "Up there with *It Follows*, *Get Out* and *Hereditary* as one of the most gripping and original horror films of the last decade." Bonuses: three featurettes (22 minutes).



SLOW GODS

SFX Loves

Lives and how to live them

★★★★★

RELEASED 18 NOVEMBER
432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Claire North**
Publisher **Orbit Books**

What would it mean to endure beyond one lifetime? How would that change you? These are questions that, albeit sometimes subtly, recur in the fiction of Claire North, the pseudonym Catherine Webb adopted for the *The First Fifteen Lives Of Harry August* (2014), a novel that, as the title suggests, had more than a hint of *Groundhog Day* about it.

Back then it seemed as if North was set to become a writer of high-concept slipstream fiction. As things turned out, North has merrily roamed across genres as they've seen fit. In the case of *Slow Gods*, that means the kind of SF associated with the Culture books of Iain M Banks or, latterly, the novels of Ann Leckie and Arkady Martine, a kind of sociological space opera that while never ducking the grandeur of a battle scene, is far more interested in the interplay of peoples from different spacefaring civilisations.

In *Slow Gods*, an extraordinary novel that will surely be shortlisted for multiple awards, we see the universe through the eyes of narrator Mawukana na-Vdnaze, introduced in mysterious fashion as "a very poor copy of myself". "Maw" is someone who, piloting a ship into the void, died and survived. Maw is immortal, quite possibly a murderer, and at peace in "arcspace". This is the realm through which starships move, filled with strange voices that prey on travellers' minds. Mostly, people don't want to be around Maw, and he lives alone, tending his garden on an island.

But when it's predicted that a supernova will send a blast wave out across inhabited worlds, Maw's ability to travel again and again through arcspace means he is called from his isolated existence. Planets in the wave's path cannot be saved, but that doesn't mean their peoples – and the cultures and artefacts they have created – should be abandoned.

In an ideal universe, everyone would be saved, but the far future North conjures up is far from perfect. In particular, the Shine, a kind of post-libertarian, authoritarian society that indentures its subjects and is overseen by an elite suspicious of education and expertise, doesn't see the point of saving those its self-appointed leaders deem insignificant. Maw, born into the Shine and cruelly treated because of his lowly status, is now pitted against it.

Slow Gods, then, is a book of huge events, very possibly a fable for our own era of climate change, neoliberalism and the cosseted but paranoid rich enjoying parallel lives. It's also, in its final chapters, a consideration of a vast moral conundrum that turns out to underpin the whole novel: is it justifiable to do bad things for the greater good?

Yet that's not why it lingers in the imagination. Rather, it's the way North shows us more intimate moments as Maw moves through an exotic universe populated not just by the Shine, but by AIs, aliens, organic spaceships, and the hive-mind culture of the consensus. Central to the book (and this comes across as inherently political in the times through which we're living) is a celebration of diversity – the joy of difference.

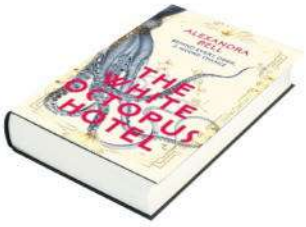
Then there's Gebre, an archivist on the doomed planet of Adjumir,

> **"A novel that will surely be shortlisted for multiple awards"**

who shows Maw, while te (this is a novel of multiple pronouns, including those only people obsessed with status value) denies this on a kind of technicality, love. In another author's hands, the way would be clear for Maw to rediscover his lost humanity. But Maw's experiences have left him both less and more than human. He has far more in common with the Slow, the god-like entity that first brings news of impending destruction.

Instead, Maw, unique and alone, seems to gain from Gebre a new capacity to accept his place in the unfolding universe. It's not a comfortable place to be, but then again, whoever thought lives were easy? **Jonathan Wright**

i People of Bath! Claire North will be joining MR Carey for a talk at Mr B's Emporium on 18 November (regular tickets £8).



THE WHITE OCTOPUS HOTEL

★★★½☆

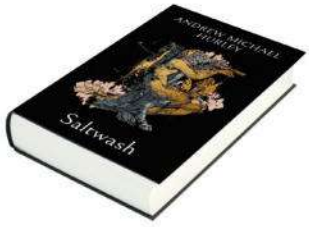
RELEASED OUT NOW!
368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Alexandra Bell**
Publisher **Del Rey**

Sometimes, a novel has all the right elements, but they just don't quite come together.

Eve Shaw is an art expert with a magic octopus tattoo and a tragic past. A series of coincidences (or are they?) lead her to the auction-house world's equivalent of an urban legend: a picturesquely ruined hotel up a mountain in Switzerland.

After a perhaps excessive amount of descriptive throat-clearing, the book sends her back in time to the White Octopus's 1935 heyday: all art deco hallways, free-flowing champagne and mirrors you don't want to look at for too long. But she can't shake the feeling that she's being recognised by apparent strangers – and she, too, spots familiar faces where they definitely shouldn't be, including a younger (but not younger enough) version of a man she just met in 2015.

Alexandra Bell balances the glamour and the grim very nicely, seasoning the well-crafted aesthetics of her setting with a pleasant shiver of creepiness, and a deep undertone of grief. The dilemma is compelling: how much would you sacrifice to correct a past mistake? But the pace is on the languid side, and if you're familiar with this kind of story, you'll soon be ahead of the main characters in working out what's going on. **Nic Clarke**



SALTWASH

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
256 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Andrew Michael Hurley**
Publisher **John Murray**

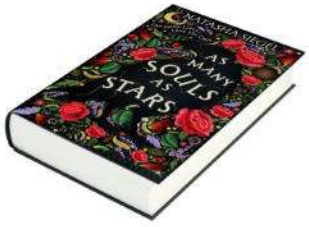
Folk horror master and *Starve Acre* author Andrew Michael Hurley returns with an eerie new novel set in a rundown seaside town.

Tom Shift has spent the last few years alone. Now facing the end of his life, he wants to do some good by gifting money to his penniless penpal, Oliver. They agree to meet for dinner at the Castle Hotel in Saltwash, but when Tom gets there, Oliver is nowhere to be seen. Instead, a group of elderly people have gathered to take part in a mysterious lottery that Tom is quickly inducted into.

Hurley is a master of atmosphere. He perfectly evokes the weirdness of gone-to-seed English seaside towns and out-of-season hotels. The majority of the book takes place within the walls of the Castle, and you can vividly picture its fading carpets and unpleasant dinners.

Unfortunately, there's little story here and it quickly starts to feel like Tom – and the reader – is being kept in a holding pattern as Hurley endlessly teases out the already fairly apparent answer to the book's big mystery. Shirley Jackson fans may find the big reveal especially familiar.

Saltwash is at its strongest when musing on ageing, mortality and regret, but it feels like a short story that's been stretched to novel length and packaged in a genre – horror – that doesn't entirely suit it. **Will Salmon**



AS MANY SOULS AS STARS

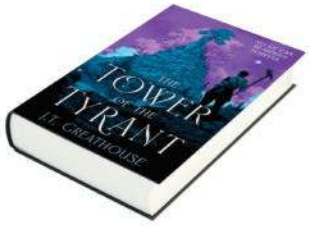
★★★½☆

RELEASED 6 NOVEMBER
320 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Natasha Siegel**
Publisher **Bloomsbury Archer**

A lesbian gothic romance that takes place across centuries, *As Many Souls As Stars* is confident and occasionally impressive. But, rather like its characters, it's also too caught up in its own introspective musings, leaving the reader a bit bored at times.

Its star is a demonic entity who calls herself Miriam and feeds on human souls. She becomes entranced by the powerful soul belonging to Cybil Harding, the "First Daughter" of her landowner family in 16th century England. Poor Cybil lives under a curse, doomed to lose anyone she loves. At first, Miriam wants to devour her, but then a strange feeling takes over. Could it be love? Similarly, Cybil is drawn to this weird woman who can walk through walls and turn into a crow. But misery looms, and so their twisted affair must skip through the ages.

There's a meticulous amount of world-building and research going on here, with author Natasha Siegel in firm control of her settings. Both women are well-drawn and, in Miriam's case, deliciously unpredictable. Yet the characters' inner monologues are so unrelentingly intense that the book becomes strangely tiring to read, like wading through a morose teenager's diary. Still, all this pining and wailing *is* very gothic – and the finale is worth the wait. **Jayne Nelson**



THE TOWER OF THE TYRANT

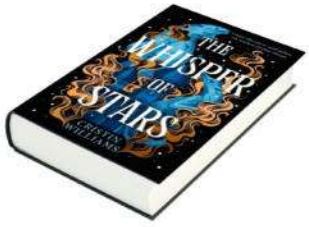
★★★★½

RELEASED 6 NOVEMBER
594 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **JT Greathouse**
Publisher **Gollancz**

JT Greathouse flexes the muscles of his imagination with *The Tower Of The Tyrant*, drawing a world where rival factions – variously secular, religious and magical – vie for influence and control. The anchor for the story is Fola, a sorceress from the fabled City of the Wise who crosses paths with Siwan, a young girl whose soul is bound to a terrifying raven spirit, and her guardian Llewyn. The trio become entangled with Owyn, heir to the throne of Parwys, a kingdom haunted by vengeful spirits motivated by a grievance lost to the mists of time.

There's a lot to digest, from political intrigues to clashes between competing ideologies, but Greathouse never lets the worldbuilding overwhelm the characters. He devotes as much energy to the inner lives of his antagonists – like Torin, a crusading fanatic of the power-hungry Mortal Church – as he does to Fola and her allies. No less impressive is the way the author will introduce an idea that at first appears to be a minor splash of cultural colour which subsequently blooms into a major plot point.

While the concept of an innocent child burdened with containing a destructive demon may be familiar, this is a work of expansive scope and scale, with thrilling battles, compelling characters and high stakes. **David West**



THE WHISPER OF STARS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 6 NOVEMBER
464 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Cristin Williams**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Slavic mythology dovetails with post-revolutionary Russia's obsession with the occult and mind control in this atmospheric and evocative alt-history fantasy.

It's 1923, and imprisoned anarchist/poet/sorceress Katya Efremova is being experimented on by Lenin's secret police. She's then relocated to a political prison on a remote, frozen island. There she's forced into hard labour with a bunch of the cheeriest half-starved and regularly tortured inmates you could hope for, including a cossack were-bear who has the hots for her – which is exactly what Katya doesn't want.

She'd rather follow clues left by her mother to uncover an ancient, mystical tome that could save Russia. Or is she just a pawn in a larger game?

There's plenty to enjoy and admire, especially the way Cristin Williams combines folklore with history, shining a light on bizarre, little-known corners of the early USSR. There are intriguing characters, multilayered villains, a not-over-laboured romantasy element, and a grounded approach to magic.

But for a book featuring rape, torture, starvation and death, it's very cosy, and the plotting feels a little like *Harry Potter* meets Wordle at times. A fun and unusual read, but no literary revolution. **Dave Golder**

Reviews

ICE

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED 6 NOVEMBER
1,200 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Jacek Dukaj**
Publisher **Head Of Zeus**

First published in Poland in 2007, *Ice* is a sprawling alternate-history steampunk novel that, while its length is daunting, more than rewards the effort. Beginning in 1924, it portrays a world that's familiar and yet utterly strange thanks to the effects of the Tunguska event, the biggest impact event in Earth's recorded history.

In our timeline, this resulted in a sparsely populated wilderness in eastern Siberia being decimated as a stony asteroid exploded in the air after entering the atmosphere. In Jacek Dukaj's vision, the effects were far more profound as Ice, a weird form of matter, begins to spread out from Siberia. The Russian Empire (which here didn't fall to the Bolsheviks) and Europe are getting colder, as the chill spreads west. The world's physics are getting weirder, too.

But people still travel east, notably the mathematician, logician and gambler Benedykt Gierosławski, sent from a Russian-controlled Warsaw via the trans-Siberian express after being contacted by officials from the Ministry of Winter.

Intrigue and strangeness follow in a novel that's as technically brilliant as it is imaginative. Myriad characters move across its pages, but it's Benedykt who holds the attention, a feckless antihero who seems to have wandered in from a 20th-century modernist novel. An extraordinary book. **Jonathan Wright**

GIRL DINNER

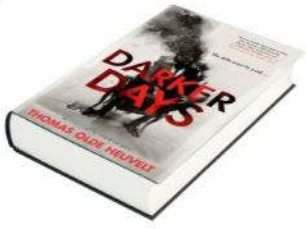
★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Olivie Blake**
Publisher **Mantle**

The girls of The House are perfect. Only the most beautiful, brilliant and ineffably cool are invited to join the sorority, so logically, of course, they all go on to become incredibly successful women. Sociology professor Sloane is struggling to juggle her career, husband, and baby, so when she's asked to become an academic advisor to the House, she's initially jealous, then intrigued. How do these women manage to have it all, and still have such shiny hair?

The title (and the tagline: "Good girls deserve a treat") hint at what might be going on, but the House keeps its secrets until at least three quarters of the way through. In alternating chapters, Sloane and a current pledge, Nina, slowly get closer to being part of the House, drawn in by the promise of success and sisterhood. They're both acutely aware of the sacrifices the world demands of women, so consumed with the idea of being a good woman that their inner monologues end up sounding like feminist X-formerly-Twitter discourse.

Basically, how much you enjoy this book will depend on your TikTok algorithm – and how many takedowns of cottagecore you've seen this week. There's righteous anger here, some delightfully nasty psychological horror, and plenty of sharp satire, but it's just a little too anxiously introspective to really feel dangerous. **Sarah Dobbs**



DARKER DAYS

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!
416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Thomas Olde Heuvelt**
Publisher **Bantam**

The thorny issue of assisted dying is given a supernatural horror twist in the latest novel from the author of *HEX*.

Every November, the overachieving residents on Bird Street, Lock Haven WA, experience Darker Days. Most of the year, they're the luckiest, most affluent and most successful people around. But each November, their luck runs out, and increasingly worse things happen until they offer up a sacrifice to a being known as The Accountant.

Because they're not *really* evil, they always try to find a willing victim – someone close to death who's considering assisted euthanasia anyway. Which is fine, until one year the list of potential candidates grows shorter and shorter until the desperate residents start making some very bad decisions about who to kill.

Wrapped around this concept is a rich, witty and often gruesome tale that encompasses black humour and disturbing horror. Full of morally dubious but fascinating characters, questions about the nature of evil and moments of almost near-cinematic tension, it's a compelling and thought-provoking read.

Ultimately, it falters with an ending that sacrifices characterisation for a sensationalist twist (plus there's a cameo from James Corden), but that's a small price to pay for such a creepily accomplished tale. **Dave Golder**

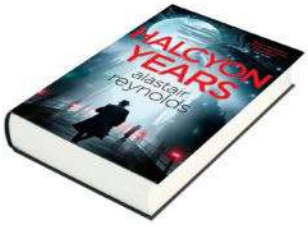
REISSUES

Jeff VanderMeer returns to the world of his Southern Reach trilogy – set in a remote area of North America mysteriously transformed, perhaps by alien

intervention – with **ABSOLUTION** (★★★★½, out now, Fourth Estate). Taking place before the events of the first book *Annihilation*, it consists of a trio of prequel novellas, each recounting a different expedition. We said: "VanderMeer's writing remains as precise and unsettling as ever... A terrific return that only adds to the original trilogy's uneasy thrills." The first in a trilogy, Richard Swan's epic fantasy **GRAVE EMPIRE** (★★★★☆, out now, Orbit) is set against an imposingly complex backdrop of competing

nations, species and doctrines, and has an undercurrent of eldritch horror. When communication between the mortal dimension and the spirit realm falls silent, an ambassador goes in search of answers. We said: "It's an ambitious undertaking, but the scale of the plot is never allowed to overwhelm the emotional inner lives and struggles of the characters." Finally, Mary E Pearson's fantasy romance **THE COURTING OF BRISTOL KEATS** (★★★★☆, out now, Tor Bramble) centres on the titular

21-year-old, who strikes a deal with a fae king to find a magical door in exchange for help finding the father she believed was dead. We said: "It might not be original, but it's very well done. A well-realised world full of lust, battles and betrayals."



HALCYON YEARS

★★★★½

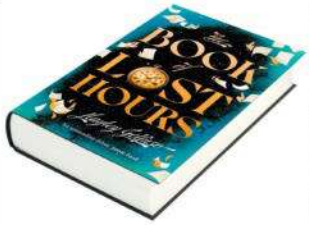
RELEASED OUT NOW!
336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Alastair Reynolds**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Space opera maestro
Alastair Reynolds moves into murder mystery territory with his latest. But don't worry – while *Halcyon Years* may sound like the name of a retirement home, this is no *The Thursday Murder Club*, but a hugely entertaining film noir pastiche set on a generational spaceship.

The laconic private eye in this case is Yuri Gagarin. Yes, that Yuri Gagarin. Or maybe not. It's complicated. He's enlisted by a mysterious femme fatale to investigate the apparently unrelated deaths of two teens from rival powerful families. What he uncovers is a conspiracy that shakes the ship's society to the core. And involves the kind of mind-boggling images and concepts Hollywood directors should be lining up to visualise.

While there's a winning lightness of tone throughout, don't be fooled. Things that come across like outrageous coincidences and stylistic conceits purely to evoke the noirish clichés (the onboard tech feels very mid-20th century, for example) end up having a ruthlessly SF rationale. The procedural format also leads to some very wordy revelations, but Reynolds's cod-noir dialogue is such snappy fun that he gets away with it.

All this, plus a potentially terrifying existential sci-fi threat, which one character pretty much writes off as, "Well, that's life, innit?" **Dave Golder**



THE BOOK OF LOST HOURS

★★★☆☆

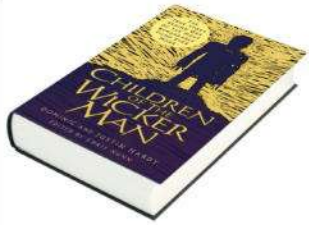
RELEASED 6 NOVEMBER
387 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Hayley Gelfuso**
Publisher **Atlantic Books**

Memories make us who we
are – and the memories of history create the world we live in. In this debut novel, memories are made real in the time space, a place where the memories of the dead are stored in books on shelves. Some people – timekeepers – can access them, and some of these choose to shape the current world by burning the memories of those they think history was better off without.

Eleven-year-old Lisavet Levy is thrust into the time space by her father on Kristallnacht. When he never returns, she grows up in a library of memories, learning cultures and languages, with all of human history to dive into.

She rescues lives from timekeepers – first Nazis, later Americans and Russians as the Cold War develops, but always people convinced that their way is the only way to preserve the world order.

There's a wonderful sense of history here, with various powers' justifications around the Cold War itself and their strategies of destroying memories, and Lisavet's development within the time space and the relationships created there are well spun. Later twists and revelations are jarring, though, and character decisions often feel a little too driven by plot. An emotive, romantic journey that doesn't quite land. **Rhian Drinkwater**



CHILDREN OF THE WICKER MAN

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
229 pages | Hardback/ebook
Authors **Justin Hardy, Dominic Hardy**
Publisher **The History Press**

This companion piece to a
documentary that's screened at festivals, but still awaits a wider release, has a remarkable story behind it. In 2021, a woman found sacks of paperwork in her attic, left by a prior resident: an ex-wife of *The Wicker Man* director Robin Hardy. She contacted the family, resulting in two of his sons going through a suitcase full of documentation on dad's tale of pagan sacrifice.

Not a good jumping-on point, it's strictly for Wickermaniacs. And it's not the treasure trove they might be hoping for. A few interesting letters relating to courting studios and the edit are reproduced, but you'll learn nothing new about production. The main revelation is how Hardy exploited the good will of his wife Carolyn, who pumped huge sums of her own money into keeping him afloat.

In the second half, discussion turns to the growth of the cult, and Hardy's subsequent work. He emerges as a charming but feckless figure – a serial ghoster who failed to take responsibility for eight children by six wives.

A tale of two voices, it switches between filmmaker Justin Hardy and art historian Dominic Hardy, and the latter's long-winded musings are hard going. ("Bloody hell, he doesn't half go on," Justin cracks.) In a book that notes Christopher Lee's windbaggery, and Robin's "inability to really do the work", this seems ironic. **Calvin Baxter**

ALSO OUT

As ever, there are loads more books we couldn't fit in. Centred on a military academy, in a future where a cold war rages between two powerful nations, Chloe Gong's YA cyberpunk thriller **COLDWIRE** (6 November, Hodderscape) follows two teens – one "upcountry" in virtual reality, one "downcountry" IRL – who begin to suspect they're puzzle pieces in a larger conspiracy. Daniel Church's horror **THE SOUND OF THE DARK** (out now, Angry Robot) involves the mystery of an artist who, while working on an audio-visual installation at a former RAF base, killed his family and then himself. When a true crime podcaster acquires his cassette recordings, she investigates, ultimately discovering that something terrible has been unleashed... Written by Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson, the latest original Fifteenth Doctor novel is **DOCTOR WHO: THE MOON CRUISE** (13 November, BBC Books). It sees the Time Lord and Belinda discovering the sinister side of a luxury space liner. Sheila O'Malley's **FRANKENSTEIN** (out now, Titan Books) – well, that's the title on the cover, anyhow – is a pricey (RRP £55) deluxe coffee table book which features concept art, storyboards and interviews with Guillermo del Toro and his collaborators. NB: the US publisher, Insight Editions, has also produced pricier Portfolio and Artifact Editions, which come with additional goodies. Finally, **HORROR'S NEW WAVE** (out now, Simon Element) marks 15 years of production company Blumhouse, speaking to the cast and crew of 19 key titles.

First Read
AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

In His Day

by John Francis O'Neill

A head trip and a nostalgia trip, but above all an endlessly intriguing, page-turning romp

It was the sound of the aeroplane that first alerted Shay to something strange. As he was strolling back down Viewfield after the nostalgia visit to his primary school, St Michael's, he was given cause to look up by the unusually loud noise of a jet engine. He was wondering whether it was so loud because it was flying low. He realised that he wouldn't know: he couldn't remember the last time the sound of an aeroplane had caught his attention.

Ten feet further on, he passed a woman in her mid-thirties. She struck him as somehow old-fashioned. It wasn't one thing. In fact, it was pretty much everything. Her short but neck-hugging hairstyle, her knee-length denim dress, her beige tights... These days, women's tights were almost always black. Had been since he was in his late teens in the early eighties. In fact, at first black tights had seemed quite shocking – they looked morbid, or even slutty. A couple of minutes later, an orange van passed him with a distinctive white logo on its side reading "LEB". The same logo had appeared on every electricity bill his household had received when he was a kid. The London Electricity Board. He hadn't seen that logo in years – decades, even. The LEB had ceased to exist long ago.

Continuing his way up Viewfield, he idly noted that a car parked at the kerb had a metal bumper. It also had a 'G' suffix on its registration plate, from before the letter system was scrapped. He snorted when he saw that the car parked immediately behind this one also had a metal bumper and an old registration number, in this case "J". *Must be retro-oriented round here*, he thought. But he had a strange feeling in his stomach, not least because he was fairly sure the cars he had passed on the way here were modern.

Then he remembered the dog shit. He'd seen a fly-buzzing pile outside the school field. He hadn't thought anything of it. It was quite a common sight, after all. He'd seen some more turds by a lamppost further up, and when he'd been passing the triangle of green that was an island in the road, a smell of excreta had wafted across to him. It was only now that he realised this *wasn't* normal. Yes, he'd seen many a steaming, fragrant pile of dog mess outside St Michael's' school field – but in the seventies, when he'd last been there. It wouldn't be common now. People had been legally required to clean up after their dogs for yonks: he remembered a neighbour moaning about the new law when Tony Blair was in power. Shay realised he was sweating heavily.

When he got to West Hill, it struck him that it was oddly quiet. He realised there was a lot less traffic on it than there had been when he'd crossed it before. Those passing cars that did come into view were all old-fashioned. As he got to the other side and headed down Portinscale Road, he glanced over at the Technology Academy. That also seemed different, somehow. He stopped dead when he realised why. The metal fence was gone. The one set into the wall which had been a new feature to him. He didn't cross the road because he didn't want to look like a weirdo hanging around a school, but as he resumed walking, he threw several glances at where the fence had been. It seemed that workmen had removed it in the fifteen minutes he'd spent walking to and from St Michael's. It was bizarre, but he guessed he could believe it. Until he noticed the sign.

A large brown wooden board stated the building to be Mayfield Comprehensive School for Girls. The modern blue fibreglass sign declaring it to be Ashburton Technology Academy – which had been in the same place a quarter of an hour back – was nowhere to be seen. He could feel the bewildered expression on his face. He looked around. There were cars parked at the kerbs, although not as many as when he'd passed this way before. They all had metal bumpers. And tax discs. When had they been discontinued? Then he was throwing his face upwards again because an aeroplane was passing overhead to the accompaniment of that elongated whistle-rumble that had been part of the soundtrack of his childhood and adolescence but which was never heard anymore.

He realised he felt woozy. He glanced to his left and, finding he was next to a

Synopsis

With his goodbye notes written and his bequests arranged, Shay is making a last nostalgic visit to his childhood neighbourhood. As he glumly traverses his old council estate, he is reminded how all his problems stem from the fact that, when he was 12, his family were evicted and transferred to a sink estate several miles away. He wishes so, so much this traumatic upheaval had never happened.

Heading back to where his car is parked, he notices odd things: vehicles with metal bumpers and tax discs, cigarettes in the hands of every passer-by, outmoded fashions... Then he encounters a young boy who he realises is him. He is back in 1976, with no idea how to get out.

Shay decides to turn the inexplicable situation in which he finds himself to the advantage of the person he thinks of as Young Shay. Plunging fully into mid-'70s culture, he plots to influence life opportunities for his younger self so that he will not end up like the older, tormented version – him.

house's low wooden fence, put a palm against it. He stood with his head bowed, staring at the pavement. He threw a glance across the road. The Mayfield sign was still there. The railinged fence was still not there.

He turned around to fully face the school. He found that his mouth was open. He took the opportunity to gulp for breath. He put his hands on his hips and his chin on his chest and took further deep breaths. He looked up. Now he realised that the new school buildings and adjuncts he'd noticed earlier were also no longer visible. He found himself saying aloud, "Bloody hell."

He took another breath, this time through his nose. He stepped forward and off the kerb. He crossed the road almost aggressively, as though he was responding to a challenge the school had laid down to him, but as its buildings grew larger in his sight his bravado disintegrated. He didn't feel aggressive. He felt...

Actually, he felt faint. He'd only ever felt faint a couple of times before in his life, when he'd reacted badly to a nasal spray prescribed for seasonal allergies. This was much worse. His footsteps seemed to judder through his body as he walked slowly up to the Mayfield sign. He stood staring at it. He shook his head, emitting a stupefied sound.

He turned and lowered himself to the wall below the sign. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, breathing in deeply. After a minute or so, he sat up and turned his head. The sign above him still said Mayfield. He hunched over once more. He tried taking deep breaths again. He threw another glance over his shoulder, but the Ashburton sign still hadn't come back. Ridiculously, he'd been hoping to sort of 'sneak up' on the Mayfield sign.

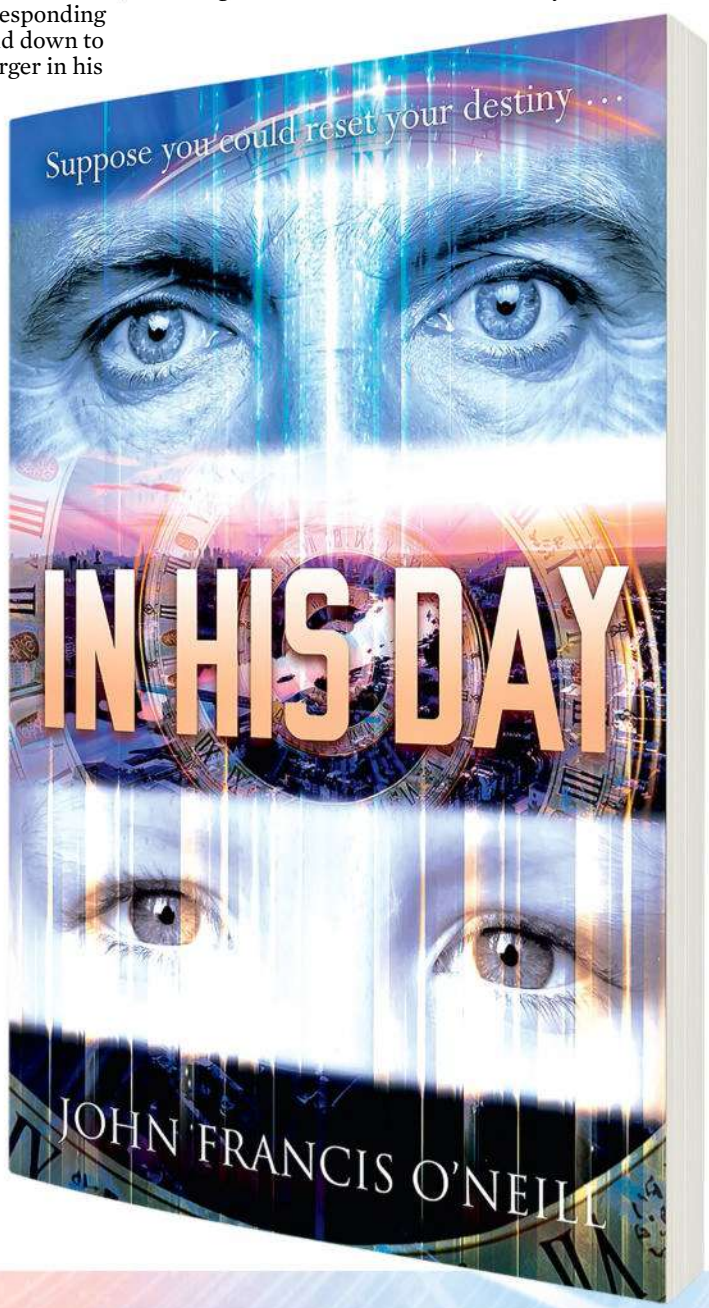
He looked up as he sensed somebody approaching. It was a man in his twenties. Shay looked the man up and down, then into his face. He was trying to work out whether he looked old-fashioned. He did: his moustache and centre-parted hair and patterned, long-sleeved shirt were totally seventies. The fact that he was smoking wasn't necessarily odd but – now he came to think of it – the woman he'd passed in Viewfield Road had also had a cigarette in her hand. You rarely saw smokers now. He looked away when the man narrowed his eyes at him.

Shay felt movement on his forehead. Bringing his hand up, he realised it was sweat. Was he feverish? *Maybe I should call an ambulance.* He reached for his phone. The screen told him there was no service.

As he continued sitting through the weird combination of shivering and heavy sweating, he turned his head to find a boy of ten or eleven approaching. The boy had a lush mop of black hair, parted at the side and falling on his forehead in a half-moon fringe. He had green eyes, a freckly nose and full, red lips. He was wearing a brown jumper with a V-neck and square patterning, a blue shirt the top button of whose collar was done up and turquoise, pin-striped trousers. On his feet were a scuffed pair of black Clark's shoes. It was a horrible get-up, but not uncommon. Not, that is, for the 1970s. Shay took in a quick gasp of a breath. He realised he recognised the boy. Peeking out from behind the neck of the boy's jumper was white string. Most people wouldn't have known why. Shay did. One embarrassing, distressing evening, Shay had had to go knocking on his elderly aunt Peg's door to ask if he could spend the night there: he'd lost his key and his dad hadn't come home that evening. As theirs was a one-parent household, he was in trouble. After that, he'd kept his front-door key on a piece of string around his neck so he'd never lose it again.

The boy, like the moustachioed man had been, was unsettled by Shay's unwavering gaze, but he responded not with hostility but the innocence of childhood, awkwardly flicking away his eyes. Perhaps a little fearfully too: Shay knew he must look odd.

The boy threw a glance over his shoulder after he went by to see if this hunched, shivering, sweating figure was still staring at him. Shay was. How could he not? He was looking at himself.



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KILLRITHMERE

STOCK IMAGES: ESDEO / 500PX, NARVO VEXAR/GETTY

GODZILLA: KAI-SEI ERA

Across The Zilla-verse

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **IDW Publishing**
Writers **Tim Seeley, Ethan S Parker, Griffin Sheridan, Chris Gooch**
Artist **Nikola Čižmešija, Pablo Tunica, Oliver Ono**

NEW LINE **The recent return of** legendary giant monster Godzilla to the Marvel Universe may have grabbed plenty of attention, but publisher IDW has been letting the big G wreak large-scale comic-book havoc since 2011.

Its already hefty roster of Godzilla comics has now been boosted with three ongoing titles featuring a new shared universe. The "Kai-Sei Era" stories are all set in a radically different, much stranger version of a kaiju-affected world, bringing together superhero tropes, post-apocalyptic action and bonkers space opera. The core title, simply called **Godzilla** ★★★★☆ gives us a strong entry point into this new reality, where decades of constant monster attacks have transformed the world in unpredictable ways, and a team of American kaiju fighters has a new member – a superpowered teenager possessing the power of Godzilla and a temperament to match.

Across its first three issues, there's plenty of wild adventure and thunderous action, with energetic visuals from artist Nikola Čižmešija. We also get some engaging characterisation from writer Tim Seeley, who sets enough intrigue in motion to hint at promising directions for future issues to explore.

Things get much weirder in **Godzilla: Escape The Deadzone** ★★★★½, a *2000 AD*-esque take on *Mad Max* that follows the mysterious Wanderer as he prowls the devastated and walled-off Pacific Northwest of America. A land of twisted mutants and the sinister Church of Godzilla, the Deadzone is an admirably weird setting that's crammed with grotesque creatures and enjoyably bizarre characters.

There's also a strong emotional throughline, as the Wanderer encounters two mysterious children with the ability to "pilot" kaiju. Artist Pablo Tunica displays some top-notch visual storytelling here, elevating these first three issues into stylishly lurid territory and making this pulpy adventure the most promising of the bunch.

The hardest series to assess right now (as only one issue is available so far) is **Starship Godzilla** ★★★½☆, a colourful space opera which sees a motley gang of outlaws utilising Mechagodzilla as a spaceship in order to cruise the galaxy.

> **"They are all set in a much stranger version of a kaiju-affected world"**

That debut chapter is a likeable, fast-paced sci-fi adventure with great, manga-influenced art from Oliver Ono. It just doesn't quite feel connected enough to the other two titles yet; with a few tweaks it could easily be an entirely self-contained (but still enjoyable) SF comic.

Hopefully *Starship Godzilla* can find its feet, because otherwise this new Kai-Sei era of Godzilla comics is off to an entertaining and monster-heavy start.

Saxon Bullock

i Tim Seeley's next comic project is writing *Inglorious X-Men* for Marvel, an ongoing title due to launch in January 2026.

ULTIMATE OZ UNIVERSE: THE LOST LANDS

★★★★☆

RELEASED **11 NOVEMBER**
Publisher **AWA Studios**
Writers **Cullen Bunn, Larry King**
Artist **Mike Deodato Jr**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **While *Wicked*** adds songs to L Frank Baum's classic fantasy, this Elton John-endorsed graphic novel takes a more action-packed approach, initially at least.

With the Tin Man transformed into a formidable Iron Man-esque figure, main protagonist Tip is rescued from the clutches of evil witch Mombi by the gun-toting Special Oz Operations Team. The story then settles into a more traditional narrative as they journey along the Yellow Brick Road to Emerald City.

With the Wizard and Dorothy quickly sidelined, the stableboy at first makes for quite an unassuming lead. But all is not what it seems as co-writers Cullen Bunn and music producer Larry King deliver a clever twist that plays with gender identity.

Refreshingly making good use of Oz lore beyond *The Wizard Of Oz* itself, Bunn and King introduce several characters from other books, including the Hungry Tiger and Jack Pumpkinhead. Enhanced by Ive Svorcina's vibrant colours, Mike Deodato Jr's impressive art combines intricately detailed figurework with dynamic layouts. With the ending of this first volume suggesting Dorothy isn't gone for good, this is the perfect place to get your post-*Wicked* Oz fix. **Stephen Jewell**

BIG-ASS SWORD

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Rebellion**
Writer/artist **Andreas Butzbach**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **Asking the** important question, "What if a robot had a *really* big sword?", this new graphic novel is very much in the tradition of *2000 AD*'s punky spirit, even if it doesn't manage to linger long in the memory.

Written and drawn by German artist Andreas Butzbach, it's an episodic collection of oddball tales set on a devastated planet in the wake of a mysterious war.

Now largely populated by self-sustaining technology and weird alien beasts, the resulting wastelands are also home to a taciturn sword-wielding robot who wanders from place to place in the company of a talking metal skull.

The biggest strength here is the visuals, with Butzbach going for a jagged, heavily stylised artistic approach, delivering striking double-page spreads and impactful fight sequences. Combined with this, there's creative world-building and some genuinely atmospheric moments, all realised with energetic, angular lines and bold colours.

It's a pity, then, that the actual stories feel like half-explored rough drafts that either come to an abrupt, seemingly random halt, or barely add up to more than a couple of half-hearted gags. Combine this with clunky, tin-eared dialogue, and the contrast between the visuals and storytelling couldn't be harsher, leaving this as a good-looking but frustrating disappointment. **Saxon Bullock**

Superman's new suit left a lot to be desired.

SUPERMAN: THE KRYPTONITE SPECTRUM

Special K

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC/Black Label**
Writer **W Maxwell Prince**
Artist **Martín Morazzo**

ISSUES 1-3 **As influential classic** comics go, Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *All-Star Superman* is in the top rankings. Now, as well as being an influence on James Gunn's *Superman* movie, its DNA is all over DC's latest Black Label miniseries.

Hailing from the creators of the long-running Image Comics horror anthology *Ice Cream Man*, *The Kryptonite Spectrum* offers a deeply quirky take on Superman's relationship with his home planet.

The plot is sparked off by the discovery of four new strains of Kryptonite. Superman decides to test them on himself, and the first three issues showcase different results, whether it's Kal-El regressing to boyhood or spending a day as a skyscraper-sized giant.

There's an intriguing mix of '60s Silver Age optimism and a weirder indie sensibility, with writer W Maxwell Prince and artist Martín Morazzo finding interesting ways to twist familiar *Superman* tropes.

With two issues still to go, it's tricky to say whether this will remain a lightweight, charmingly crafted romp, or if the hints at more complicated emotional themes are going to pay off. Whichever way it goes, *The Kryptonite Spectrum* is a compellingly weird slice of superheroic nostalgia.

Saxon Bullock

i A movie adaptation of *Ice Cream Man* is currently being developed by *Wednesday* creators Alfred Gough and Miles Millar.

THE UNCHOSEN

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writer/artist **David Marquez**

ISSUES 1-4 **While comparisons** can be drawn with his current work on Marvel's *Uncanny X-Men* – or indeed, other schools for gifted youngsters, as seen in *Wednesday* or *Harry Potter* – David Marquez's first series as a writer/artist excels not only with its typically lush artwork, but also its compelling storyline.

It centres on 13-year-old Aida, the reluctant hero of the title, who's ostracised by her fellow pupils as her preternatural abilities – devastatingly powerful, if the flashbacks in a city ruined by an explosion that she apparently caused is any indication – fail to manifest properly.

Approached by a rival faction, she questions her loyalties and discovers the true nature of their power, The Word, which is where things get heady. With shades of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and Alan Moore and Grant Morrison's writing, Marquez launches into an exploration of the nature of language and magic, evoking the Enochian chants of Dr John Dee.

Deftly incorporating a range of different styles, Marquez imbues Aida's facial expressions with an endearing manga-esque quality, and is excellently supported by Marissa Louise's painterly colours.

With the series only running for four issues, some plotlines are resolved a bit too abruptly. But at least there's Marvel's Marquez-scripted *Sinister's Six* to enjoy before the anticipated second series. **Stephen Jewell**

SILENT HILL f

SFX Loves

Turning Japanese

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PS5**

Also available on **PC, Xbox Series X/S**

Publisher **Konami**

VIDEOGAME **Hinako inhabits a** world hostile to her existence long before the fog descends. The contemporary small-town Americana of earlier entries in the much beloved horror series has been swapped out in favour of a rural Japanese locale during the '60s. Headstrong Hinako is a far cry from the demure young lady her family demands. She storms out after a fight. Then a familiar fog descends, alongside red, fleshy blooms, ushering in fresh terror.

Silent Hill f is both a series high and its own unique beast. The writing here is the best it has ever been, offering both a compelling mystery and an empathetic portrait of a young woman desperate to decide her own fate. Replayability is key to the experience, with every playthrough offering double-edged answers that will soon draw you back into the fog. Smart design makes these subsequent returns to town a breezier experience, allowing you to focus on the meaty morsels of mundane and supernatural drama that the game wants you to chew over.

Silent Hill f is also the most combat-focused the series has ever been, still offering note collecting and tense exploration alongside fighting mechanics exclusively using melee weapons. Gone is your everyman protagonist haphazardly wielding a gun, with Hinako instead performing perfect parries, scrupulously managing stamina and popping off slow but hard-hitting attacks like she's a *Dark Souls* protagonist rather than an average high school girl.

As with earlier entries, the option to run away largely remains, though the game's final stretch backs you into many corners; deciding that one compulsory combat gauntlet isn't enough, you're stuck battling through three in quick succession. For a game you're meant to mull over more than once, it makes what should be a memorable crescendo into a gruelling ordeal, but it's also still really satisfying to pull off a perfectly timed counter-attack against a fleshy foe.

There's so much to like about the horrors here. Everything from monster design to how you add a new string to your bow in combat feeds beautifully and horrifyingly back into the story. This is the best *Silent Hill* has been in years. You may never want to leave.

Jess Kinghorn

i A classroom in Ebisugaoka Middle School has some sheet music on the wall. It's the theme from the original *Silent Hill*.

GHOST OF YŌTEI

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PS5**

Publisher **Sony Interactive Ent**

VIDEOGAME **Ghost Of Yōtei** takes the ancient Greek approach to retelling history, weaving together truth and mythology so neatly that you can no longer see the seams.

It's set at the turn of 17th century Japan. You play as Atsu, a hardened ronin on a quest to slay her family's killers. She's an archetypal figure in an archetypal samurai revenge story, but *Ghost Of Yōtei* employs a larger-than-life sheen at every opportunity. Gorgeous visuals make the open-world RPG look like a living painting, while an emphasis on discovery means you'll often stumble upon your next adventure by pure coincidence. A passing storyteller may recall the legend of an undead samurai, which you can then investigate, while following a golden bird in another direction can lead you to hidden treasure. It's remarkably well done, blurring real life and fantasy to immerse you in its world.

Atsu is a magnetic, Clint Eastwood-style anti-hero – a cutthroat and a mercenary, but impossible to look away from. There are some pacing issues caused by telling a closed story in a sprawling open world, with later acts suffering from rushed narratives, but overall, *Ghost Of Yotei* (to borrow from the imagery it so lovingly recreates) is a vibrant cherry blossom – you won't notice a few missing petals.

Andrew Brown

DOCTOR WHO

Ghosts of futures past

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **55 minutes/49 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Apparitions haunt** the latest releases from Big Finish's flagship Ninth and Thirteenth Doctor ranges, though these are two very different tales.

The Ninth Doctor and Rose return to London in **The Last Days Of The Powell Estate** ★★★★☆. It's a few decades into the future, and Rose's home has fallen into dereliction. Teaming up with an urban explorer and podcaster, the TARDIS team try to figure out what happened, but instead find themselves stalked by a spectral presence.

Taking place over two time zones – 2006 and 2036 – Timothy X Atack's script introduces an effectively creepy new monster. It has a memorable supporting cast too. Podcast bro Ellis (Harki Bhambra) is cocky, but likeable, while Jackie Tyler's neighbour "Brainy" Betty (Mandi Symonds) is good value. Above all it remains a joy to hear Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper together again in a story that effortlessly captures that nostalgic season one vibe, while still feeling fresh.

Lionesses In Winter ★★★☆☆ is less surefooted, though still enjoyable. The TARDIS brings the Doctor and Yaz to Henry II's court at Christmas, just as the King has been reunited with his wife – whom he had previously imprisoned – Eleanor of Aquitaine. As the Time Lord investigates a mysterious figure at large in the castle, she discovers a portal to another universe.

Riffing on James Goldman's play *The Lion In Winter*, Lisa McMullin's script is very much *Who* in pop historical mode. The goofiness sometimes grates – the Doctor chatting to a horse named Barrold is every bit as eye-rolling as the Eleventh Doctor talking to babies – and the climax is a bit of a muddle. Still, there's a vein of well-played melancholy in the complex relationship between Debra Baker's Eleanor of Aquitaine and Kevin Mathurin's Henry II, which brings warmth and humanity to the drama.

Will Salmon

ℹ Harki Bhambra previously played a UNIT employee who decrypts a message from Missy in "The Magician's Apprentice".

STAR TREK: KHAN

Ceti limits

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **325 minutes**
- Format **Podcast**
- Publisher **CBS Studios**

AUDIO DRAMA **"In my experience** monsters are made, not born," says Dr Rosalind Lear, a key character in this nine-episode exploration of *Star Trek*'s most enduring antagonist. "I'd like to better understand the recipe."

It's a statement of intent for the first audio serial in the franchise's near-60 year history. Originally conceived for TV by *The Wrath Of Khan*'s writer and director Nicholas Meyer, it's both a prequel and a sequel to the movie that elevated a minor villain from *The Original Series* into an icon of the final frontier.

Lost's Naveen Andrews humanises the genetically modified tyrant of legend. Whether quoting Yeats or suavely introducing an alien to the delights of vodka, he's a genial, cultured, impeccably well-spoken figure, closer to the character's original appearance in "Space Seed". It's a fine performance that allows as many flashes of vulnerability as steel, though ultimately this sympathetic, more nuanced take on Khan isn't half as compelling as Ricardo Montalban's Kirk-hunting big-screen Ahab.

A post-*Generations* framing narrative includes welcome appearances by Tim Russ as Tuvok and George Takei, bringing a weathered gravitas to Sulu. The main action, naturally, takes place on Ceti Alpha V, as the exiled Khan fights to carve out both a new world and a relationship with Starfleet's Marla McGivers (Wrenn Schmidt), both of which we know are doomed. Certain story choices complicate the mythic simplicity of Khan's quest for vengeance, but the audio drama format makes this a rewarding return to a more thoughtful, character-driven *Trek*.

Nick Setchfield

> **"The first audio serial in the franchise's near-60 year history"**

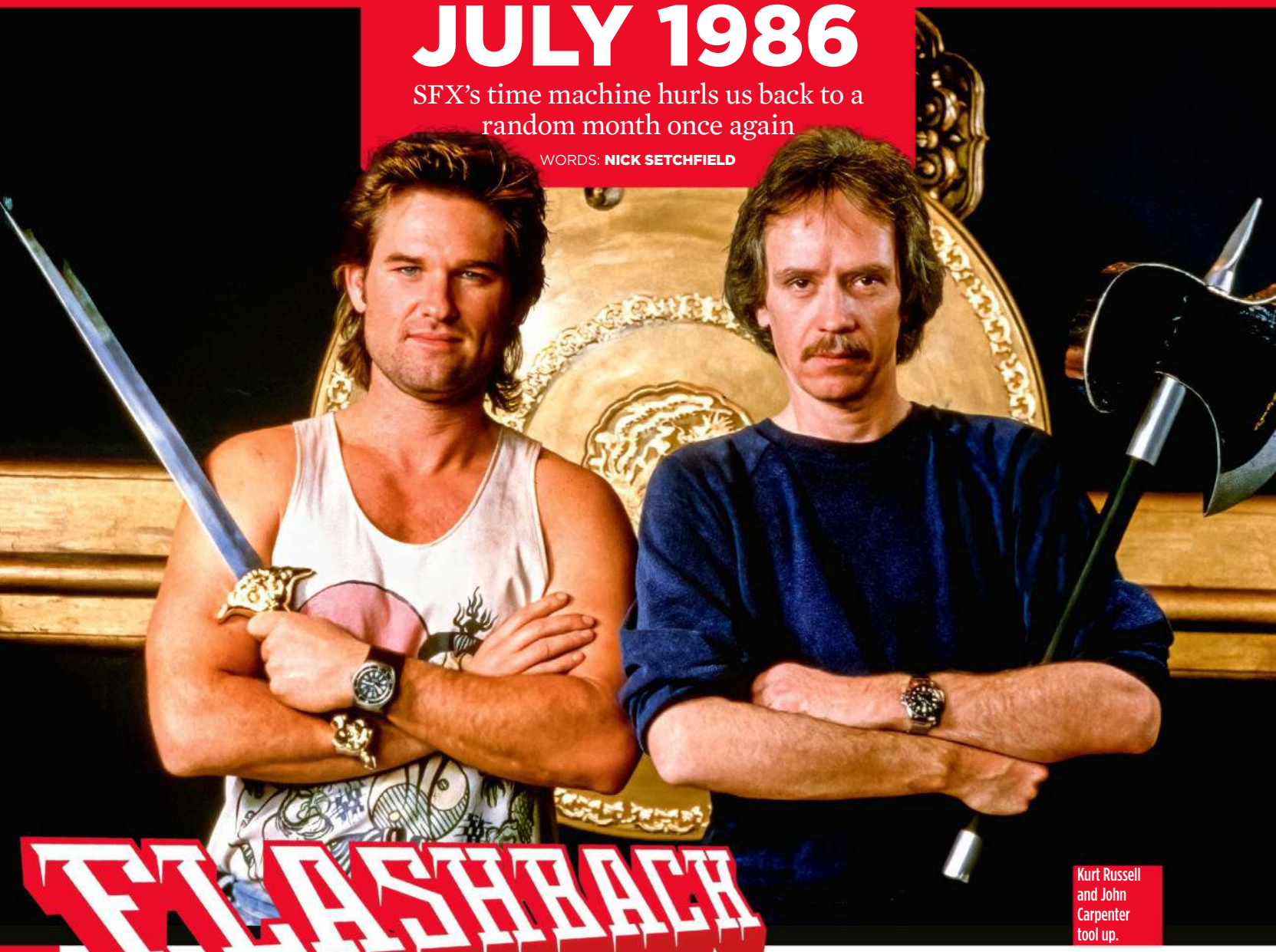
If anyone can Khan, it's Naveen Andrews.

ℹ In 2018, Nicholas Meyer's original proposal for a three-episode *Star Trek* miniseries was titled *Ceti Alpha V*.

JULY 1986

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



Kurt Russell and John Carpenter tool up.

FLASHBACK

China Syndrome

2 JULY 1986 *Big Trouble In Little China* was never going to be easily pigeonholed. Even director John Carpenter reached for the hyphens as he sold it to the press. "It's an action-adventure-comedy-kung-fu-ghost-story-monster movie," he revealed, pausing for breath as he bolted the genres together. "There's no way that there's been a film like this!"

It was nearly an even stranger brew. The original screenplay by Gary Goldman and David Z Weinstein was set in the 1880s and collided ancient Chinese mysticism with classic Hollywood gunslinging. WD Richter – writer of 1978's *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* and director of cult fave *The Adventures Of Buckaroo Banzai Across The 8th Dimension* – was hired to haul this wuxia Western into the 1980s.

"His reasoning was that *Rosemary's Baby* worked because it was a modern-day film about ghosts, demons and the underworld," Carpenter told *Monsterland* magazine. "Instead of a truck driver, there was a cowboy [in the original script]. So you had to believe the Western, then you had to believe Chinatown in the Old West, then you had to believe the mythical demons and heroes and villains. Richter said, 'Look, that's too much to believe. That's asking way too much.' And he's right!"

While it made the screen as *Big Trouble In Little China*, Goldman and Weinstein's original Western version was titled *Lotus*.

For the role of everyman hero Jack Burton, who stumbles into San Francisco's secret netherworld to battle an immortal sorcerer with designs on his friend's fiancée, Carpenter originally approached Clint Eastwood and Jack Nicholson. When these A-listers passed, he was reunited with longtime collaborator Kurt Russell; ideal casting for a character Carpenter saw as a sidekick convinced he was the leading man. "I needed someone with a comedic sense because a lot of the characters in this movie are very offbeat."

Big Trouble was aptly named when it came to the box office. Soon eclipsed by the opening of James Cameron's *Aliens*, it grossed $11.1 million in North America against an estimated $19-25 million budget. "The reception it received, and the reasons for that reception, were too much for me to deal with," said Carpenter, who stepped away from the Hollywood machine after the film was released. "I'm too old for that sort of bullshit."

Forget it, John. It's Chinatown.

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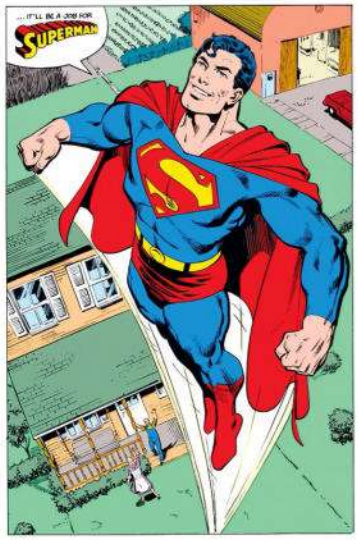

© DC COMICS

Steel Industry

10 JULY 1986 If Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* deconstructed *Batman*, then John Byrne's *The Man Of Steel* was intended as a reconstruction, retooling Superman for Ronald Reagan's America. The path had been prepared by company-wide crossover *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, an extinction-level event for DC Comics continuity. Out went nearly half a century of tangled lore and deep-cut mythology, replaced by a fresh, rebooted universe.

"I have taken my standard 'back to the basics' approach," said Byrne, lured from Marvel to write and draw this bold six-issue miniseries. "All of the debris that has accumulated over the years has been the result of people trying to do something different. So now I'm taking Superman back to the basics, and that becomes different because it hasn't been done in so long."

Byrne applied a lethal dose of Kryptonite to such beloved icons as Superboy, Supergirl and Krypto the Superdog, all erased from the character's history (Comet the Super-Horse? No chance). The Fortress of Solitude was equally absent – "Clark Kent is his Fortress of Solitude," Byrne argued – while issue one, recapping the much-told origin story, introduced a stranger, more alien Krypton. In this revamped continuity, Ma and Pa Kent were still alive and Lex Luthor was a bullet-headed tycoon, furious at being displaced as the number-one alpha male in Metropolis.

Byrne even wanted to tweak Superman's foundation myth, having his pregnant mother rocketing to Earth, only to die from Kryptonite after giving birth to Kal-El. DC said no – some things were sacred.

Lovebug Starski did *Top Of The Pops* on 11 June.

© TOP OF THE POPS/BBC

Haunted House Music

5 JULY 1986 "For god's sake, get out!" screamed posters for 1979's tale of demonic infestation *The Amityville Horror*. But hip-hop legend Lovebug Starski (real name Kevin Smith) was heading to the party: "We got to go there, man, I'm serious, we got to!"

"Amityville (The House On The Hill)" stood at a fitting number 13 on the UK chart at the start of July 1986. Essentially a Bronx take on 1962 novelty song "Monster Mash" – referenced in the lyrics – it finds Starski mingling with Dracula, the Invisible Man and the Bride of Frankenstein while what sounds like a pretty fly Cylon intones the title. Adding to the genre-mashing joy are some remarkably good impersonations of Kirk and Spock, beaming into the madness courtesy of a blundering Scotty.

Starski quickly planned his own *Amityville II*. "It's a follow up," he told *NME*. "They had *Rocky IV*. I'm not no fool." By the following year, however, he was serving a prison sentence for possession after becoming addicted to cocaine.

© SIRE/WARNER BROS

IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Margaret Thatcher
- **US President:** Ronald Reagan
- **In the charts:** Madonna rules with "Papa Don't Preach", only surrendering to Chris de Burgh's "The Lady In Red".
- **In the news:** The Statue of Liberty reopens after its centennial refurbishment; estate agent Suzy Lamplugh vanishes in London; the Commonwealth Games are held in Edinburgh; a transfer record for a British footballer is set twice in 24 hours as Barcelona sign Gary Lineker for £2.75 million and Juventus spend £3.2 million on Ian Rush.

ON THE SHELF

Aliens' Sigourney Weaver prepares to kick xenomorph ass on the cover of *Starlog* 109, an issue that asks, "Is *Star Wars* fandom dead?" We're going with "Nope".

© STARLOG GROUP, INC.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

FOUND FOOTAGE

If it helps, pretend the questions for this issue's quiz are playing on a static-ridden old VHS tape...

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
Name the 1980 Ruggero Deodato movie that is often credited with creating the found footage format.

QUESTION 2
In *The Blair Witch Project*, what's the name of the child-murdering hermit who made some of his victims stand in a corner?

QUESTION 3
Which found footage franchise has instalments called *The Marked Ones*, *The Ghost Dimension* and *Next Of Kin*?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this found footage movie.

QUESTION 5
In which popular tourist attraction is the 2014 film *As Above, So Below* set?

QUESTION 6
Josh Trank, director of 2015's *Fantastic Four*, previously directed which superhero-themed found footage flick?

QUESTION 7
In M Night Shyamalan's *The Visit*, who exactly do brother and sister Becca and Tyler go to visit?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Supply the title that's been removed from this movie poster.

QUESTION 9
What word is missing from both of these found footage film titles: *The* _____ *Theory* and _____*'s Army*?

QUESTION 10
Name the *Doctor Who* episode that is presented in a found footage format. (Hint: it stars Peter Capaldi.)

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
What was the title of the American remake of the Spanish zombie film *[REC]*?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Supply the title that's been removed from this movie poster.

QUESTION 13
What real-life event inspired Ti West's found footage film *The Sacrament*?

QUESTION 14
Unfriended (2014) and *Host* (2020) both revolve around (different) videoconferencing applications. Name them both.

QUESTION 15
Which found footage film centres on an edition of talk show *Night Owls With Jack Delroy*?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this found footage movie.

QUESTION 17
Which found footage film had the tagline "Some Thing Has Found Us"?

QUESTION 18
The 2022 film *LOLA* features "The Sound Of Marching Feet" – a fascist pop hit from an alternate-timeline Britain. Which real-life musician wrote it?

QUESTION 19
Name the found footage horror set in the abandoned Ukrainian city of Pripyat.

QUESTION 20
What was the title of the poorly-received 2000 sequel to *The Blair Witch Project*?

Answers

1 *Cannibal Holocaust* 2 Rustin Parr 3 *Paranormal Activity* 4 *One Cut Of The Dead* 5 The Paris catacombs 6 *Chronicle* 7 Their grandparents 8 *Diary Of The Dead* 9 Frankenstein 10 "Sleep No More" 11 *Quarantine* 12 *The Last Exorcism* 13 The Jonestown Massacre 14 Skype, Zoom 15 *Late Night With The Devil* 16 *Creep* 17 *Cloverfield* 18 Neil Hannon 19 *Chernobyl Diaries* 20 *Book Of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*

How did you do?

What quality is your footage?

0-5 Super 8

6-10 Betamax

11-15 DVD

16-19 Blu-ray

20 4K UHD

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SFX

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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DID YOU THINK WE WERE DONE?

RETURN TO HAWKINS ONE. LAST. TIME. (AGAIN)

STRANGER THINGS SEASON FIVE

ALL CONTENTS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE – YOU MIGHT HAVE SPOTTED SOME OF THE THINGS MENTIONED WERE SUPPOSED TO BE IN THIS ISSUE. THERE'S NOT A PRIZE.

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NETFLIX

Doctor Who "Voyager"

AND THEN I SENSED HIS PRESENCE.
HE HAD COME UP FROM BELOW TO TASTE THIS TIMELESS OCEAN...
HE WAS NOT LIKE OTHER MEN.
HE SPOKE NOT. AT TIMES HE APPEARED NOT TO MOVE, NOR EVEN TO TAKE BREATH.
AND YET I COULD SENSE HIS UNTRAMMELLED THOUGHTS, AS DISTANT AS THE SOUTHERN CROSS...
AS DARK AS UNLIMNED NIGHT...
AS DEEP AS THE UNCHARTED SEAS...
AND I WAS HIS PRISONER.
HE HAD LASHED ME TO THE WHEEL, LEST IN STORM-HAUNTED WATERS I SHOULD DISAPPEAR FOREVER...
JUST VOYAGER AND ME.

Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

While I believe "Voyager" is the high point of *Doctor Who* in comics, I struggle to recount the plot, as this is a case where – to quote Jefferson Airplane – "logic and proportion have fallen sloppy dead".

Set largely in "an outback dimension somewhere between mythology and madness", it opens with the Sixth Doctor dreaming of being tied to the wheel of a sailing ship set to plummet off a waterfall at the edge of the world. As he chases Time Lord Astrolabus – a blunderbuss-packing thief with with a Da Vinci-style helicopter – in pursuit of star charts stolen from the god-like Voyager, it never gets any less weird.

"Voyager" was the core five-parter of four connected strips that ran in *Doctor Who Magazine* from April 1984-March 1985. Writer Steve Parkhouse and artist John Ridgway were given carte blanche by editor Alan McKenzie. "There was no brief. We were left to our own devices," Ridgway told fanzine *Vworp Vworp!* They revelled in that freedom. "We sparked off something in each other," Parkhouse said, "something that gave us permission to venture into unknown territory... an inner landscape, where all things are possible."

The result: a heady mix of mythic imagery (scratched out in intricate detail by Ridgway's crow quill nib); whimsical humour (it turns out that blunderbuss only fires a "BANG!" flag); and freewheeling plotting which fully exploit the medium's potential.

The arc-closing two-parter exemplifies that, as the Doctor enters a make-believe land within a magician's cabinet, and the format briefly apes Alfred Bestall's *Rupert The Bear* strips, rhyming couplets and all. Try doing that on BBC One – or having a companion like the "Whifferdill" Frobisher, a shapeshifter who's taken the form of a (talking) penguin.

Some cringed, but I loved Frobisher (using him in my ropey fan fiction). And I adored enigmatic trickster Astrolabus – forever babbling Del Boy French ("Gare du Nord!"), British slang ("Stone the flamin' crows!"), and pop culture references ("To the bat-poles!").

Untethered from the usual petty restraints of budget and common sense (Parkhouse put it beautifully: "It ran barefoot through the grass, like an expression of joy"), these giddily thrilling strips represent *Doctor Who* at its most liberated and adventurous. ●

Ian once spent 14 years as a till on a checkout counter in a supermarket in Walhamstow.

Fact Attack!

- Parkhouse took Frobisher's name from a photo of two horses in the royal stables – one named after explorer Sir Martin Frobisher.
- A "whifferdill" is an unconventional aerobatic move. Parkhouse got the term from an article about manoeuvring a space capsule.
- When the Doctor meets a Tarzan type, there's a sly nod to '30s/'40s strip artist Burne Hogarth – Ridgway included part of his signature.
- A colourised collection of "Voyager" was published by Marvel UK in 1989. Colourist Gina Hart also worked on the *Rupert* annuals. Fancy that!
- John Ridgway made a brief return to *DWM* in 2016 for issue 500, illustrating part of celebratory strip "The Stockbridge Showdown".

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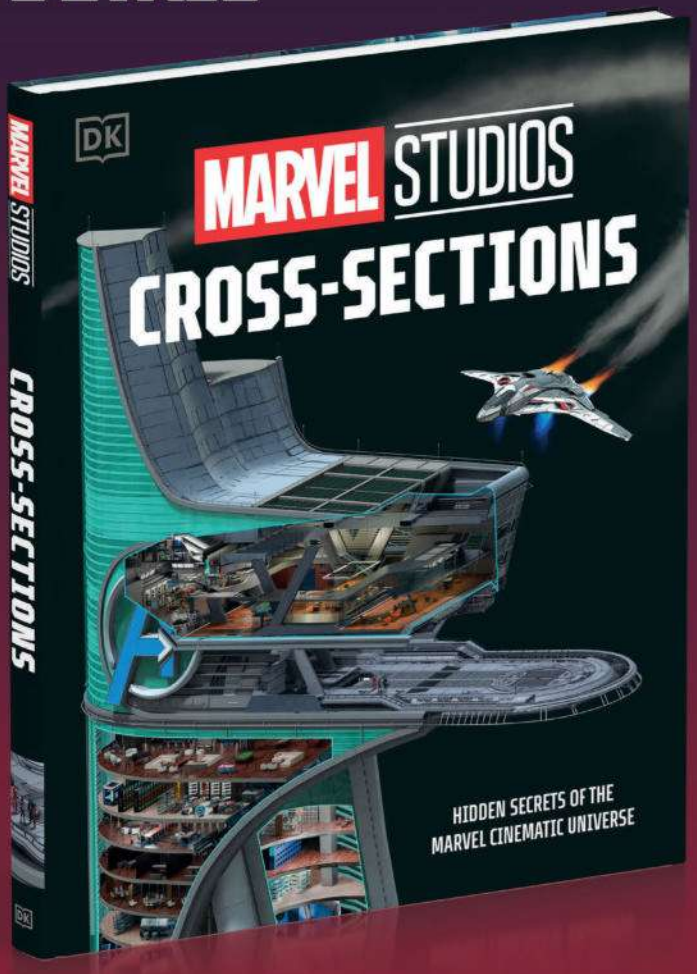
THE MCU IN NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN DETAIL



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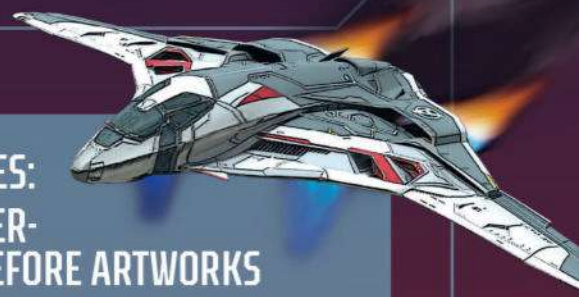

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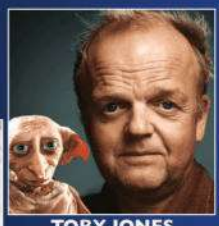
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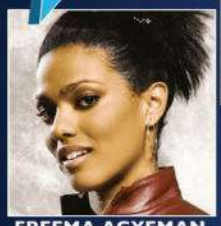
STRANGER THINGS
BRIDGE OF SPIES

ALEC BALDWIN
BEETLEJUICE, MISSION IMPOSSIBLE
HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER

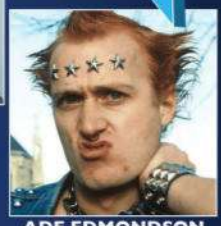
MATTHEW LEWIS
HARRY POTTER
MURDER BEFORE EVENSONG

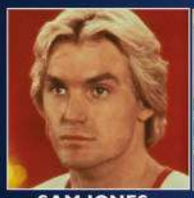
ARTHUR DARVILL
LEGENDS OF TOMORROW
DOCTOR WHO


FREEMA AGYEMAN
DOCTOR WHO, SENSE8
NEW AMSTERDAM

OVER 70 GUESTS ALREADY ANNOUNCED!

PLUS DEALERS HALL, PHOTOS, SIGNINGS, TALKS, DISPLAYS & MORE!

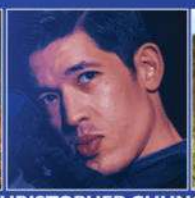

ADE EDMONDSON
YOUNG ONES, BOTTOM
ALIEN: EARTH


SAM JONES
FLASH GORDON, TED
STARGATE SG-1

BRIAN BLESSED
FLASH GORDON
STAR WARS, BLACKADDER

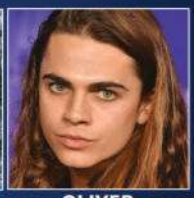
RICHARD DREYFUSS
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS
JAWS

BONNIE LANGFORD
DOCTOR WHO


CHRISTOPHER CHUNG
DOCTOR WHO
SLOW HORSES

BEN WHITEHEAD
WALLACE & GROMIT

MOOSA MOSTAFA
WEDNESDAY


OLIVER WATSON
WEDNESDAY

GET SELFIE READY FOR OUR NEW DRAG ZONE! AND DON'T FORGET THE COSPLAY & COMIC ZONES!

JUST MAY

ACTAVIA

LAWRENCE CHANEY

MISTY CHANCE

CHERYL HOLE

CHARRA TEA

REDLEDGERCREATIVE

CJDIDDUMS

CELEBRATE TWO GREAT FANDOMS WITH OUR ALIENS AND STAR WARS GUEST REUNIONS!

DIÊM CAMILLE
ALIEN: EARTH
THE WHEEL OF TIME

SANDRA YI SENCINDIVER
ALIEN: EARTH, FOUNDATION

JONATHAN AJAYI
ALIEN: EARTH, VIGIL
WONDER WOMAN 84

MOE BAR-EL
ALIEN: EARTH, DUNE
THE BUREAU, PERIPHERAL

CARL TOOP
ALIENS

CYNTHIA SCOTT
ALIENS, RUSH
INVASION EARTH

MARK ROLSTON
ALIENS, STAR TREK, SAW
SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

RICCO ROSS
ALIENS, DOCTOR WHO
MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

SULE RIMI
ANDOR, DR WHO
FOUNDATION

MUHANNAD BEN AMOR
ANDOR

LOUIS MARTIN
ANDOR, SANDMAN
SECRET LEVEL

MAX E McCABE
ANDOR, EL JEFE
THE DYING MAN

PAUL BLAKE
A NEW HOPE

RAVI CABOT-CONYERS
SKELETON CREW

PAUL GINNS
THE FORCE AWAKENS
SOLO, VENOM, MORBIUS

GERRY SHERARD
IAN DURRANT
KIT HILLIER

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